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THE COMPLETE
HAROLD CHAPIN

THE COMEDIES OF
HAROLD CHAPIN

HAROLD CHAPIN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

J. M. BARRETT

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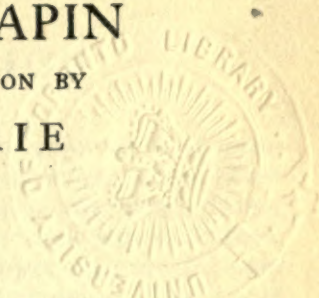
THE COMEDIES

OF

HAROLD CHAPIN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

J. M. BARRIE



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1921

THE COMEDIES

OF

HAROLD CHAPMAN



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INTRODUCTION

WHEN I agreed, very gladly, to write a few words of introduction to this volume, I cautiously bought a book about how to write plays (there are many of them), in order to see whether Mr. Chapin wrote his properly. But the book was so learned, and the author knew so much, and the subject when studied grew so difficult, that I hurriedly abandoned my inquiry. Thus one of us at least missed his last chance of discovering what that mysterious thing, "stage technique," really is, which after all does not greatly matter as nearly everyone else seems to know. I say nearly everyone else because I am not at all certain that Mr. Chapin knew. He certainly breaks most of the rules laid down in the early chapters of the guide book, but breaks them so agreeably that one feels he had unconsciously found a better way for himself. Plays ought undoubtedly to be 42 by 36, which is the real reason why writing them should be so difficult, but he does not even seem to have known the correct figures, nor indeed that play-writing was difficult; there is no sign of "building" in his comedy; he starts off at once, gaily, as if instinct told him where to begin and how to go on, and he goes on so blithely that never was a recent writer who made play-writing seem more easy. It makes him a peculiarly delightful companion to the reader, of whom it will doubtless often make a playwright who might not otherwise have been one (if there is any such person), for apparently to Mr. Chapin the difficulties are so readily surmounted that he is over them without being aware that they were there. Perhaps this is merely his masterly cunning, and he has skilfully removed the ladders by which he climbed, but I scarcely think so. I think he was the "born dramatist" who did not know how it was done but could do it. I remember many years ago being in a club—probably the last time I was in one—where everyone was discussing "style," for it was very much a literary club. Many clever and pregnant things were said about style by various able hands that day, and then the man who

was by far the most distinguished person present—the one who will no doubt be an immortal when all the rest of us are forgotten—had his say, and his definition of style was so childish that we knew not where to look. But afterwards I took melancholy comfort in the reflection that the only man in the company who did not know anything about style was also the only one who had a style. There are reasons for thinking that Mr. Chapin was that sort of dramatist. He must often have been the only man in the company who could not tell how plays should be written, but also the only one who could write them.

[The best of him is his comedy ; it is constantly witty, but still more certainly natural ; his people very seldom indeed talk “out of their parts.” You never find B saying something good that might have been said more legitimately by C, who, however, happened not to be in the scene at the time. This cannot be said of many writers for the stage, especially when their game is “artificial comedy,” as, on the whole, Mr. Chapin’s was ; and it is what keeps his characters, however light and airy the quest on which he sends them forth, nearly always true to life. They may not be living in quite a real world, but they are always human beings ; not always human beings in whose fate we are violently interested—the artificiality of the theme may stand deliberately in the way of that—but sufficiently human to look very like ourselves. As a whole, I think *The New Morality* deserves first place in this volume, and would merit a high place in any gathering together of the best English comedies of recent years. The subject may be said to be the effect of the heat of a “record summer” on a few people living in house-boats, and throughout this truly witty play we feel that heat as if the time were the July of 1921. Seldom has atmosphere been better conveyed. Betty Jones, the engaging and maddening heroine, is the young matron with whom Mr. Chapin disports divertingly in more than one of his plays ; never more successfully than here. And the piece runs on laughingly to its gay and inevitable conclusion, after which Mr. Chapin smilingly packs away his puppets in a box ; they are puppets, but they were alive all the time he pulled the strings.

Pauline of *Art and Opportunity* is a more ambitious study than Betty Jones, but made out of very similar ingredients, quite as charming but not placed perhaps in as happy an environment. She has to prove a case too much, and so cannot laze on her back as Betty would have done in any emergency ; by the end of *Art*

and *Opportunity* we do not quite feel as we do in *The New Morality* that Mr. Chapin has followed someone's three rules of play-writing—"first, I tell them what I am going to do, then I do it, then I tell them I have done it," the "them" being of course the public. No such fault can be found with *Elaine*, but though we get here into closer touch with life, what the author has to tell "them" seems to be less worth while. Perhaps *The Marriage of Columbine* will prove to be the most popular of all these plays, for though bizarre in its conditions it is the most lovable; it has some delicious incidental characters, and it seeks a place in the reader's heart. But I do not myself rank it with the first two plays of the volume; it seems to me more artificial than they because it sets out to be something else—something quite as good, no doubt, but something that in his short and splendid life Mr. Chapin could not do so well.

It was very likely something that if he had lived he would have done best of all. As everyone who is interested in the art of the theatre knows, this gifted man fought and fell for his country in the war. He was still very young, and had only so far, I believe, been getting his tools in good state for the bigger work he would have accomplished. He would have returned from France, it is not too hazardous to guess, seeing life more deeply and more clearly. In the plays he has left us he saw it, on the whole, as it has long been accepted to be on the stage. His characters are stage types who lived and moved on the boards before his time, and he was content to take them for what they were, and make them seem fresh and charming and new because he himself had those gracious qualities. But had he come back to us it would surely have been, not indeed without these attributes—they would still have been for our delight—but with a mind mellowed and strengthened by what he had felt; not on the stage would he have sought for his problems but in life itself. Even his delicious ladies would have been delicious in a new way; he would have known that he had not said the last word about them when he made them seductive and contradictory and childish and cunning according to the engaging patterns. Instead, he died a gallant soldier's death. He was probably the greatest "might have been," so far as his particular art is concerned, that fell in the war.

J. M. BARRIE.

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THE NEW MORALITY

CHARACTERS

COLONEL IVOR JONES.

BETTY JONES, *his Wife.*

GEOFFREY BELASIS, K.C., *her Brother.*

ALICE MEYNE, *her Friend.*

E. WALLACE WISTER, *a Neighbour.*

WOOTON, *Man-Servant.*

LESCELINE, *Maid.*

The Action of the Play takes place on the Jones's Houseboat, the "Hyacinth"; the Wisters' Boat, the "Merry Mischief," being near by.

The time occupied is from 4.30 to 8 o'clock on an evening in a record summer.

ACT I

SCENE

BETTY'S BEDROOM ON THE "HYACINTH"

A low, rectangular room: its chief furnishing a large chintz-hung bed. Three small, square, chintz-curtained windows break the far wall into equal panels of flowery wall-paper. The door is up R. Below it is a white enamelled wardrobe. The bed's head is to the wall L., the configuration of which (it projects between two alcoves) places that article of furniture almost in the centre of the room, and in a very visible position.

Below the bed against the wall (half in the alcove) is a table supporting a few books, papers, hairbrushes, fruit, a vase of flowers, smelling-salts, and a jug of lemonade—iced and tinkly—and glasses. There are, of course, other things on this bedside table—such as a patience pack, a fountain-pen, and some photographs in frames—but I need not enumerate them—unless, perhaps, I mention the tin of Brand's essence—open on a plate, with a spoon in it.

There is a chintz-covered couch along the foot of the bed; a dressing-table up at the middle window; the bed curtains probably hide a chest of drawers in the far alcove above the bed-head. Only two chairs are in the room, one against the wall below the wardrobe, and one up at the dressing-table.

It will be seen that there is not much space in the room—or cabin. A depth of six feet below the bed, something less above it, and a channel four feet wide between the couch at the foot of the bed and the wardrobe.

In the bed is MRS. BETTY JONES. Her back is to us, but we feel sure that nobody but herself could wear such a very modish marvel of a lace boudoir cap or such a dream of a lace bed-jacket.

The room is delightfully shady and cool, though the sun is blazing upon the tree-clad bank beyond the windows and on the river below them; from which last its ripple-swayed reflections dance upon the ceiling.

The lady in the bed turns over with a sigh of irritation and faces us. Yes, it is MRS. BETTY, as we suspected from

her attire. Her expression is not her usual one, though. Her eyes—which are wide open as she turns—are bright and hard, and it is obvious that the word which she frames with her lips is designed to congrue. She shuts her mouth firmly, however, without speaking, and, closing her eyes with disciplinary tightness, sets herself to sleep with great severity and determination.

There is a knock at the door and LESCELINE—the maid—enters. She comes to foot of bed and awaits a signal to discover her errand. BETTY gives it without opening her eyes.

BETTY (*in a discouraging—not to say warning—voice*). Well?

LESCE. Miss Meyne, ma'am.

BETTY (*opening her eyes incredulously*). What?

LESCE. (*repeating the information*). Miss Meyne, ma'am.

(*BETTY ponders, her lips parted in hopes of finding words in which one may ask of a servant such questions as: "What has she come for?"*)

(*Respectfully after a pause*) You did expect her to tea, ma'am.

BETTY (*half to herself*). I know I . . . (*With sudden determination*)

Ask her if she'd mind coming down here.

(*LESCELINE exits obediently. BETTY resumes her attack upon slumber. LESCELINE returns, showing in ALICE MEYNE, a tall, very English girl, or, rather, young woman—she is twenty-six or seven—of the pleasant and homely type. She is well, but not very smartly, dressed in summer white. There is something healthily ordinary about her—a dependable, restful obviousness and simplicity—that endears her immensely to the highly strung and intensely mental and complex BETTY. She comes below the bed to kiss her friend, who greets her dryly with:*)

BETTY. Bless you, my dear. You would be the one soul on the river not to hear about it.

(*They exchange the formal kiss of feminine greeting and ALICE stands erect again, looking down at BETTY, who still holds her by the hand and studies her quizzingly.*)

BETTY. You're a marvel! How in the world did you manage not to?

ALICE. Not to what?

BETTY. Not to hear about my row with Muriel Wister.

ALICE. Oh, I (*very slightly embarrassed*)—I didn't manage not to.

BETTY (*surprised*). You *have* heard about it?

ALICE. Well, I (*her embarrassment is a shade deeper, perhaps*)—I heard it.

BETTY (*horrified*). You . . . (*She is dumb for a moment, staring at her friend; then she disappears amongst the bedclothes, dragging them up to her ears and turning her back to her friend in some real and much simulated confusion.*) Oh, my dear! Go away! Go away! I'm not going to . . . (*Suddenly emerging*) You heard it all?

ALICE (*sedately*). I heard from before it began until—after it stopped, I think. (*In mitigation*) You see—I was only a—few yards away.

BETTY (*surprised and wondering*). Only a . . . Where?

ALICE. Just across the river.

BETTY. Just across the river? Oh, my conscience! (*Dryly*) You weren't just above the lock as well, by any chance?

ALICE. No, no (*more and more lamely*)—just—on the opposite bank.

BETTY. Was there anybody else there?

ALICE. No—er—mother was with me.

BETTY. I'm glad. Anyone else?

ALICE. Not when it started. They—came up.

BETTY (*with keen appreciation*). I bet they did—from far and near. (*Risking the question after a scarcely perceptible pause*) Could you—distinguish words?

ALICE. Some.

BETTY. *Mine* mostly.

ALICE. I don't think I heard her speak.

BETTY. She didn't. Her husband asked me to please go away once or twice, but I don't think he spoke up. (*After a second, in a tone that betrays the fact that she appreciates the seriousness of her behaviour, though her eyes still twinkle with the humour of it*) You heard me call her a —?

(ALICE nods.)

(*Explosively*) Then, my dear child, what on earth are you doing here?

ALICE (*smiling*). Well, you asked me to tea.

BETTY. Pretty bairn! (*She suddenly sits up and rings the bell hanging above her head.*) You may as well have a cup now you've come for it. Your character's gone, anyway. (*She switches on electric light at bed's head and sits up against pillows.*)

ALICE (*laughing sedately*). Oh, I hope not.

BETTY. It isn't a case for hope. It's a case for despair!

(LESCELINE knocks and enters.)

BETTY. Tea, Lesceline.

(LESCELINE exits.)

BETTY (*continuing*). If I'd murdered Muriel with a boathook, or something original like that, everyone would have praised you for coming to see me, but really—calling and insulting her before breakfast.

ALICE. Don't be silly.

BETTY. Your mother 'd never have let you come.

ALICE (*gently triumphing*). As it happens, I asked mother whether I should or not.

BETTY (*incredulously*). And she said yes?

ALICE. She said that if I didn't tire you, she thought you'd be glad to see me.

BETTY. My dear, are you quite a fool, or are you just pretending? Don't you realise that I've no right to expect my decent friends to so much as recognise me? Did you or did you not hear me call that woman a ——?

ALICE (*quietly*). Well, she is . . .

BETTY (*explosively*). I *know* she is! But you can't go calling people dog-show names on the deck of their own houseboat in a voice loud enough to be heard across the river.

ALICE (*mildly reproving her friend*). I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say—well, she is very trying, I know.

BETTY. Well, if that's going to be the official name for trying people . . . (*Bursting out emphatically*) No, it's no use, my dear! I've done for myself and I know it. I shan't blame people a bit for cutting me. I deserve to be cut. I went on like a—fishwife. And it wasn't only the names I called her. I said things—whole—subject—predicate, and—extras. You know. You heard me.

ALICE (*blushfully*). Yes, I heard you say several things. But it was only in the heat of the moment. You had a brain-storm.

BETTY. Bless the child! It sounds so much better with a label, doesn't it? (*Bursting out again*) No . . .

(*She checks herself abruptly as LESCELINE enters with the tea. BETTY watches her in silence as she brings it, with a little table, to below bed. Then suddenly she bursts out again.*)

I don't know why I stop for Lesceline. You know all about it, *don't* you, Lesceline?

LESCE. (*respectfully*). Oh yes, madam.

BETTY. In fact, you heard it, too, I suppose? It was only on the next houseboat. Miss Meyne heard it all excellently from the other side of the river.

LESCE. (*civilly*). We have had to boil the milk, ma'am. Mister Wooton is very sorry. This morning's went sour almost immediately.

(*She goes out. BETTY watches her off with a comic expression which she translates into words as soon as the door has closed.*)

BETTY. Did she mean that for cheek ?

ALICE. What ?

BETTY. About boiling the milk, and this morning's going sour ?

ALICE (*laughing*). Don't be ridiculous. It's frightfully hot ; everybody's having to boil their milk. We can't keep anything on shore, with a decent larder. How in the world you manage, I don't know.

BETTY (*leaning uncomfortably out of bed towards the tea-tray*). I don't manage—I pray.

ALICE (*laughing*). Does it do any good ?

BETTY. Not now that the ice has stopped coming.

ALICE (*concerned*). Can't you get any ?

BETTY. Not unless I go myself and plead for it.

ALICE. Oh, we still get ours from Tinney's. Of course, he doesn't give us anything like such a big sixpennyworth as he used to, though we pay ninepence for it and . . .

BETTY (*giving up the struggle with the distant tea-things*). I wish to goodness you'd stop boasting about your beastly ice and pour out my tea for me.

ALICE (*conitritely, hastening to obey*). I'm so sorry. You do take sugar, don't you ?

BETTY. I'll take anything that's nourishing. (*She leans back against pillows, taking with her a cress sandwich.*) My word, I'm hungry ! I sent away my lunch without tasting it, and I was starving.

ALICE (*busy pouring out*). Why did you send it away, then ?

BETTY. Oh, my dear, you must send away the next meal after a scene ; it's part of the ritual of the thing. It's no excuse, I suppose, but it's doing the thing properly, and that's *something*.

ALICE (*matter-of-factly, as she hands her her tea*). You know, you oughtn't to talk such a lot, you still look queer.

BETTY (*candidly*). I feel as weak as a rat. (*Taking another sandwich from Alice*) Thanks. You know, it's hard work expressing yourself as copiously as I did. I came home and went to bed after it.

ALICE (*moved to pity by the other's brightness*). Poor dear, you've been having a bad time of it.

BETTY (*with a trace of resentment*). Yes. And everybody on the river knows it, don't they ? That's so soothing.

ALICE. Oh, I don't think everybody knows it, but your friends, at least, will be able to make allowances. Mother was saying this morning that you'd had enough to make a saint swear.

BETTY. What a saint I must be ! Oh, my dear, it's not a bit of use. I've done it, and I don't want people to make allowances for me. (*Wavering slightly*) I'm glad you and your mother—but then you're so hopelessly good that behaviour like mine was only a phenomenon to you. You can't imagine yourself going on the way I did, can you ?

ALICE. You never know.

BETTY. Don't exult in your possibilities in that shameless way. You know you can't. If you could imagine yourself making a scene you'd realise that you mustn't countenance mine.

ALICE. It ought to be the other way about.

BETTY. Yes. That's why it isn't. You can go on making allowance for me if you like, Alice—though I don't say I wouldn't rather be independent of them even from you. As for the rest of the river—I don't want them to. I believe it was knowing that they were all busy pitying me already that put the roof on things. I've absolutely done it once and for all. They'll appreciate that I had been sorely tried, and give me the cut regretful. If they took Muriel's part and declared open war it wouldn't be half so bad. Oh, I knew before I'd got half-way through my little—but the second half didn't exactly flag, did it? I suppose I'd got to use up all the names. (*Seriously*) Isn't it perfectly astonishing what a lot I knew, too?

(*They both laugh.*)

BETTY. I suppose you've never been inspired, Alice?

ALICE. I don't think so.

BETTY. It's a curious feeling—rather nice; settled and free—from—hesitancy. I woke up with it.

ALICE. Had anything happened?

BETTY. No, nothing at all. Nothing fresh, that is. (*Cogitating*) It is curious, isn't it? I've been giving Ivor hell for a week.

ALICE. Betty!

BETTY (*mocking her*). Alice!

ALICE (*realising that her remonstrances will be ridiculed and dropping them*). No—I was just . . .

BETTY (*nodding*). I know. "Why go for the poor *man* when the *woman* lives just next door." I suppose I must be fond of Ivor.

ALICE (*meditating*). What . . . (*She stops.*)

BETTY. Well?

ALICE. I—it's being impertinent, I'm afraid.

BETTY. Well, you must make a start some day. Out with it!

ALICE. I was hoping Colonel Jones might have been able to explain.

BETTY (*mystified*). Explain? When?

ALICE. When you had it out with him.

BETTY. My dear, I haven't had it out with him.

ALICE. You said you'd been giving him hell . . .

BETTY. Yes, but you don't imagine I told him why?

ALICE (*surprised*). Didn't you?

BETTY (*shocked*). Tell a man what you're giving him hell for?

Why, he'd forgive himself in two minutes and crawl out.

ALICE (*reproachfully*). You're rather too cruel.

BETTY (*with a touch of hardness*). What? To Ivor?

ALICE (*feebly*). Well . . .

BETTY (*a challenge*). Don't you think he deserves it?

ALICE. Not to be made miserable for a whole week without knowing what for.

BETTY (*cornering her*). You think he could have borne it better if he'd known?

ALICE. Well—he might have been able to explain—or he might have admitted that he'd not behaved quite . . .

BETTY (*scoring*). Just what I said! Forgive himself freely and crawl out. He might even forgive me for having brought up the subject if I were very sweet and womanly about it.

ALICE (*tenaciously*). But he must think you fearfully unjust.

BETTY. A man always thinks you're fearfully unjust if you're not patting him on the head.

ALICE (*seriously shocked*). But don't you mind being thought unjust?

BETTY (*decidedly*). I prefer it to being thought a fool, or having Ivor thought a fool.

ALICE (*roused*). Who thinks him a fool?

BETTY. Good Lord, I do!

ALICE (*thoughtfully, after a pause*). I'm a little sorry for Colonel Jones.

BETTY. Oh, my dear, you're sweet on him yourself.

ALICE (*with spirit*). Betty, I won't have you saying things like that. They aren't funny, and they aren't nice, and I won't allow them even from you.

BETTY (*contrite, but mocking*). Pardon! I ought to be more careful. But, you see, you're the only lady of my acquaintance who has to be treated like one, and I forget.

ALICE (*uncomfortably*). Betty—please!

BETTY. Bless your pretty mind—I like you for it! I believe I admire your good qualities almost as much as you admire my bad ones.

ALICE. Your bad ones aren't so very bad.

BETTY. Well, and your good ones aren't so amazingly good, so we're about quits. Here—give me some more tea.

(ALICE obeys in silence for a moment, during which BETTY follows a train of thought which culminates in a peal of hearty laughter.)

BETTY (*still laughing*). Really, he is rather pathetic!

ALICE. Who?

BETTY. Ivor. I'm quite beginning to pity him myself—chugging up and down the river in that smelly little motor canoe of his, and coming back with a sheaf of lock tickets as a sort of alibi every evening. That's what he's been doing since I started on him.

ALICE. Oh, then he does guess what you're angry about ?

BETTY. No. I think he's just been isolating himself by—instinct.

Marvellous instincts men . . . (*Lifting her head to listen*) Listen !

ALICE. What ?

BETTY (*after a second*). I thought (*another second*)—no. What was I saying ?

ALICE. You were saying that men . . .

BETTY (*who has not dropped her listening attitude, suddenly*). Yes, it is !

ALICE. Who ?

BETTY. The Brute. He's just . . .

ALICE. Betty, do not call him that. He isn't a brute, anyway.

BETTY. No, I know he isn't. That's why it's so gratifying to call him one. Shsh ! (*Closing her eyes, she flops over on to her side, where, without opening them, she indulges in a little nervous chuckle.*) He's come back in a hurry.

(*There is a second's silence, then COLONEL JONES enters quite normally, though he is grave and obviously anxious. He is a big, broad, soldierly-looking man with a close-trimmed moustache and short, dark hair very slightly grizzled. He looks his forty-eight years, it is true, but they have been years of healthy, open-air soldiering—not of clubs and shopping.*)

JONES (*coming down between the wardrobe and the bed to ALICE'S right*). Hullo, Alice, they told me you were having tea down here. (*He throws a swift glance at BETTY, whose eyes are still tight shut.*) May I have a cup ?

ALICE (*peering into the teapot*). It's not very . . .

BETTY (*her eyes still firmly shut*). Who fetched you ?

JONES (*quietly, but unable to keep the gravity out of his voice*). Nicolai—advised me to turn back. I met him—he was going over the bridge at Sonning in his car. (*Taking cup*) Thanks.

BETTY. Did he tell you why ?

JONES. No, he—just hinted that something had happened.

BETTY (*opening her eyes appreciatively, to ALICE*). Ha ! ha ! Can't you see him doing it ? I can ! Dear, noble soul ! I love men when they're sympathising over each other's wives—they're so—so—understanding and—mutual—about it ; so discreet ! I believe men are the noblest creatures God ever made—the cowards !

ALICE (*amazed and amused, but reproving*). Betty !

BETTY. Well, it is nothing but funk. Wasn't Nicolai in a blue funk for fear he'd say too much, Ivor ?

JONES (*smiling in spite of himself*). He certainly was rather guarded.

BETTY (*with that delicate spite which she reserves for her fallen husband*). Weren't you frightened ?

JONES (*simply*). I was. I am thankful to find things no worse.

BETTY (*resenting this*). What do you mean by no worse?

JONES. Well—you are alive

BETTY. That must be a great relief to you.

JONES. And in full enjoyment of your usual good spirits.

ALICE (*rising decidedly*). I must go.

BETTY. No, Alice, don't . . .

ALICE. I really must. (*She glances at IVOR.*)

BETTY. Ivor only wants to hear about this morning, and you might help me to remember some of the things I said.

ALICE (*reprovingly*). Don't be silly. Good-bye. (*She holds out her hand.*)

BETTY (*taking the hand and retaining ALICE by it while she talks to IVOR*). Alice heard it all from the towing-path, Ivor, so you see how serious it is.

JONES. I might, if I knew what it was she heard.

BETTY. Oh, anybody on the river 'll tell you. Just run up on deck and call over the side.

JONES (*quietly*). I would rather you told me, I think.

ALICE (*pulling gently at the detaining hand*). Please, Betty!

BETTY (*quite containedly to her*). Wait a minute, dear. (*To IVOR*) I told Muriel Wister what I thought of her—rather loud—that's all.

JONES (*with the simple acceptance of a calamity which goes with a full appreciation of it*). Yes.

ALICE (*almost frightened*). Betty, I must go. (*Sotto voce as JONES goes up to the door and opens it for her*) You're behaving like a little beast. Don't.

BETTY. Why not?

ALICE. It doesn't suit you.

BETTY. It does. Look how well I do it.

ALICE. Rubbish. It's just bravado.

BETTY (*amazed at her friend's daring—and perhaps at her insight*). Alice!

ALICE (*giving a further proof of the latter quality by suddenly kissing the unrepentant one tenderly*). Good-bye, dear. I'm so sorry for what's happened.

BETTY (*touched, but mocking to the last*). I'm sure you are. Good-bye.

(*ALICE goes to door, where she shakes hands with JONES.*)

ALICE. Good-bye.

JONES. Good-bye. Thank you very much for coming over.

ALICE. Oh, I (*suddenly*)—I suppose you won't be going down to the lawns after dinner now?

JONES (*reminded of an appointment*). Oh no—I suppose we shan't. We were going to take you there, weren't we?

ALICE. Yes . . .

JONES. I wonder if you'd mind coming here instead? Come to dinner if you will . . .

ALICE. I will, of course . . .

JONES. Thank you so much. Good-bye.

(ALICE exits. JONES closes the door after her and turns towards his wife.)

BETTY (watching him as he comes down). I'm glad you're grateful to my friend for coming to see me.

JONES. I am.

BETTY. I'll tell her. She'd do more than that to please you.

JONES. Don't be silly, Betty. I think we ought to be a little grateful to Alice for calling on us if the scene this morning was as bad as you make out.

BETTY (her eyebrows raised). As I make out ?

JONES. Didn't you mean to impress me with its seriousness ?

(There is a pause. BETTY is momentarily flooded. JONES sits on chair below foot of bed. At last his thoughts drive him to utterance.)

(With more vehemence than he has yet shown) What was she doing here, anyway ?

BETTY. Alice ?

JONES. No, no, no—Muriel. Mrs. Wister. Did she just drop in in the ordinary way ? . . .

BETTY. No. Oh no. I—er—dropped in on her.

JONES (surprised). You went over to the Wisters' boat ? But I thought you hated Muriel now ?

BETTY. I do. I just—called and told her so.

JONES. What ? Unprovoked ?

BETTY (sharply). Un-what ?

JONES. Un . . . Out of sheer—I mean : didn't she do anything at all to—

BETTY (furiously). Didn't she do anything at all ? No. She—she doesn't seem to have to do anything at all. She's one of those lucky people who find things come to them without. She sat still and grinned while I swore at her, just as beautifully as she has been sitting and grinning all the summer while you danced attendance on her. Oh !

JONES (a great light breaking in upon him). Betty ! Is that what has been—wrong ? You don't mean to tell me you've been jealous of Muriel Wister !

BETTY (very decidedly). No, I don't.

JONES (ignoring her denial). But it's unbelievable !

BETTY. I'm very glad you think so.

JONES. Why didn't you tell me that you were ?

BETTY. I'm telling you now that I'm not.

JONES. I—

BETTY. Don't go on like that. (He stops.) I'm not jealous of her. You're insulting me by suggesting such a thing. I couldn't be jealous of Muriel Wister if I tried.

JONES. Then what is the matter?

BETTY (*cruelly*). It is a mystery, isn't it?

JONES (*frankly*). It is to me. (*After a second's dumbness he breaks out again.*) I . . . You can't *imagine* me making love to Muriel Wister?

BETTY. I can't. I wish I could. It would amuse me awfully.

(There is another lapse into silence. IVOR sits dumb and miserable. At last he shakes off the dejection upon him and rises with a flash of angry resentment against his treatment.)

JONES. Oh well (*putting his chair back*)—I suppose we've just got to add this to the list of a few other little pleasantries of yours which . . .

(He is moving up to the door—is at it by this time—but his imminent departure appears to throw BETTY into a cold fury, to which she sacrifices her more playful—and more cruel—method of revenging herself upon him.)

BETTY. Ivor!

(He turns at the steel in her voice.)

Come back here.

(He comes obediently to the foot of the bed.)

BETTY (*tensely*). Are you really such a fool that you can't see what you've done?

JONES (*respecting her anger*). I'm afraid I must be.

BETTY. Can't you imagine that to see you made a fool of before the whole river may possibly hurt me even more than it would to be jealous of Muriel Wister.

JONES. How—made a fool of?

BETTY. How? Oh, Ivor, if you've no sense of humour to tell you when you're making a laughing-stock of yourself, you might use your eyes for my sake.

JONES. I do—I—I haven't seen anybody laughing . . .

BETTY (*despairingly*). Oh, my God!

JONES (*genuinely grieved*). Betty, believe me, I don't know what I've done even now. I'm sorry . . . I can see that you—but I seem to have been behaving much as usual lately—this last week, since you—showed so plainly that something was displeasing you. I have been watching my behaviour like a—lynx. I really can't see what I've done out of the common. I've been miserable enough this past week, goodness knows, but I don't see how that . . . (*He gives up in pathetic despair.*)

BETTY. Poor fellow. I lead you an awful life, don't I?

JONES (*sincerely*). Really, I think you do.

BETTY. And you don't deserve it, do you? You're a pattern husband, aren't you? Everything that a wife could wish

for. That's why you've not been near Muriel Wister since you've opened this lynx-like eye on your behaviour.

JONES (*with some dignity*). I've not been going to see her because I thought that—since nothing I was doing really justified your—annoyance with me—it must be that you were placing a misconception upon some perfectly innocent—relationship—and . . .

BETTY. My dear Ivor, I never misconstrued your relations in the very least. When you bobbed up and down on your chair and fidgeted with your watch all through tea because you'd got to fetch her a packet of hairpins from the town and you dreaded finding the shop shut, I never feared it was illicit passion that made you so anxious, and even when she made you sing idiotic duets with her, I never doubted your innocence or hers.

JONES. Then if you didn't, why should you be so certain that other people would.

BETTY (*slightly puzzled*). I wasn't certain other people would . . . (*Suddenly*) Oh, I see what you mean. My dear Ivor, nobody on the Thames has doubted your beautiful innocence. They've mentioned it twenty times a day. Do you know what they've said?

JONES. What?

BETTY. They've said: "It's wonderful how that woman keeps men dangling about after her, because—she's *perfectly straight*, you know!"

JONES. Well, so she is!

BETTY. My dear, I believe it. It's the first thing you notice when you meet her.

JONES (*really angry*). You're disgusting! Absolutely disgusting! I believe you'd rather she wasn't.

BETTY (*quizzically*). That would shock you, wouldn't it?

JONES. Upon my word, it wouldn't surprise me!

BETTY (*with just a touch of regret in the question*). Anyway, not so much as it surprises you to find that I don't like seeing you look a fool.

JONES. I deny that I look a fool.

BETTY. Oh, my dear, if you are reduced to denying that you look a fool . . .

JONES (*angrily*). Well, I am reduced to denying it. And I do deny it! I fail to see that a purely pl—p—— honourable friendship . . .

BETTY (*twinkling*). Do you usually spell "honourable" with a (*mocking him*) "pl—p——"?

JONES (*savagely*). Oh, you are very funny!

BETTY. Well, I am relieved that you couldn't say it. It shows that you have some sense of humour, even if you don't act up to it.

JONES. I could say it—only I thought that you wouldn't understand. (*Determinedly*) I suppose you don't believe in platonic friendship?

BETTY (*shaking her head at him reprovingly*). It's no good trying to bluff me, Ivor. There's no sort of friendship between you and Muriel. She's simply run you down, and cornered you, and you are trying to make the best of it by calling the affair romantic names. Oh, I've seen lots of these platonic friendships. You can always recognise them quite easily; the man thinks he's a hero and looks like a fool, and the woman goes about with that damn-conceited look of having got something for nothing.

JONES (*furiously*). Betty, I will not stay and listen to you saying such things.

BETTY (*suddenly weary of the struggle*). Then go away. I've said all I wanted to. You don't understand what you've done. I was much wiser not to tell you. You don't understand, you've no . . . (*stops*).

JONES. No what?

BETTY. Oh, I don't know what you call it.

JONES. I haven't your capacity for cynical immoralism, if that is what you mean.

BETTY. That's funny. I was going to say you had no real morality, but I stopped because I knew you'd be muddled.

JONES. A queer sort of morality you've got, if it condemns a perfectly innocent friendship—

BETTY. Don't bluster every time you say friendship, dear.

JONES (*repeating it firmly*). Perfectly innocent friendship—

BETTY. There you go again. You'll never convince either me or yourself by just repeating it. Be honest. Say, if my morals condemn Muriel Wister adding you to her staff of servants—what then?

JONES. I was going to say "and condone a public scene."

BETTY (*quietly*). I see. I don't think they condone a public scene, Ivor.

JONES. Well, you appear to have made one.

BETTY. Yes, I do appear to have, don't I? I'm not exactly proud of having done it, though.

JONES. Then why did you?

BETTY. Oh, my patience!

(*There is a knock at the door. They exchange a glance.*)

BETTY. Come in.

(*LESCLINE enters with a note.*)

LESC. (*taking it to JONES*). Mr. Wister, sir.

JONES (*taking it*). Thanks. (*Opens it.*)

BETTY (*prepared for battle*). From Muriel?

JONES. No, no—Wister. (*To LESCELINE*) You needn't wait.
(*Turns page.*) Mr. Wister is upstairs?

LESCE. Yes, sir.

JONES. 'Um!

(*LESCELINE exits. JONES hands the note to BETTY, who starts reading it. Suddenly she looks up.*)

BETTY. I certainly will not apologise!

JONES. My dear Betty . . .

BETTY. I suppose you'd like me to?

JONES. You say you're not defending the scene you made . . .

BETTY. I don't know. It did me a lot of good.

JONES. Well, the good having been done . . .

BETTY (*incredulously*). You'd have me apologise to Muriel Wister?

JONES. If you've insulted her.

BETTY. If I've insulted her I'm glad of it.

JONES. My dear, you were saying just now . . .

BETTY (*unable to contain herself*). The impertinence of the woman!

First, she makes you look a fool, then she makes me lose my temper, then she has the impertinence to ask for an apology.

JONES. Betty, dear, you are in the wrong.

BETTY. I am not in the wrong. I forgot myself and overdid things, but (*resolutely*)—I was not in the wrong.

JONES. Won't you apologise for what you said when you forgot yourself?

BETTY (*perversely*). Why should I?

JONES (*evading discussion*). Don't you think it would be politic? I do.

BETTY. A man always thinks the most politic thing he can do is to humiliate his wife.

JONES. Don't be so unjust. Do you think I want you to be humiliated?

BETTY. Don't you?

JONES. You know I don't.

BETTY. All right. Go upstairs and throw that idiot over the side. . . .

JONES. I give you up entirely! Really, I begin to have fears for your sanity when you talk so wildly.

BETTY. You . . .

(*There is another knock at the door. They are silent. The knock is repeated.*)

BETTY. Oh, come in!

(*Enter LESCELINE.*)

LESCE. Mr. Wister says he will call back later, sir, if you would rather.

JONES. No, no. I'll see him now. Ask him to wait, please.

(*Exit LESCELINE.*)

BETTY. Ivor, you are not to go up. I know perfectly well what you are going to say to him.

JONES. Do you? That's more than I do.

BETTY. You're going to say that I am quite beyond reasoning with at present, but . . .

JONES (*going*.) That certainly is a suggestion.

BETTY. Ivor, you're not to go!

JONES. Betty . . .

BETTY. Well, if you promise to get an apology out of me . . .

JONES. I shall make no promise about you, Betty. I shall not say that you are beyond reasoning with *at present*. I shall . . .

BETTY. Wait. I insist upon being present—I insist upon hearing what you say to him . . .

(JONES *goes out*. BETTY *immediately rings the bell and keeps on ringing*. LESCELINE *answers it*.)

BETTY (*throwing back the sheets*). Clothes, Lesceline!

(CURTAIN.)

END OF ACT I.

ACT II

SCENE

THE DECK OF THE "HYACINTH"

The boat is moored close under the bank so that the trees make the awning which renders some houseboats so stuffy and tent-like unnecessary; it is merely stretched across one end of the deck—and not right across that—its shadow falling over a little less than half of the stage. In the shadow—nearly C.—are a wicker, tile-topped table and three chairs, a fourth chair being remote from them down R. The deck is reached by the usual staircases: one at the upper right-hand corner leads down to the landing "front door" end of the boat; the other—down L. to the tender and servants' quarters. The railing which runs around the deck is white enamelled. At its base are long boxes of marguerites and geraniums running all around, except, of course, where the stairs are.

The background is the steep, tree-clad bank in gorgeous foliage piling away into the sky, which—unless you crick your neck—is not visible from the houseboat, so close and high are the trees.

MR. WALLACE WISTER is pacing up and down. He walks slowly, twisting his heels into the deck and occasionally turning on them gracefully, his eyes fixedly following his up-turned toes, his hands deep in his pockets, after the manner of one in deep and embarrassing thought. He occasionally whistles between his tongue and teeth—but not for joy. A rather soft-cheeked, very clean-shaven man in flannels—that is the first impression of him. Attention reveals the facts that he has good features, though his jaw is weakly relaxed; that he is probably about forty, and will in a few years be called *embonpoint*, though at present he is only sedentary; that his expression—even under the worried look which he now wears—is amiable to the verge of wistfulness; and that he is obviously a peace-loving man.

To him—COLONEL JONES—who, we may remember, left his wife's bedroom in the last act and has spent the interval ascending the stairs. WISTER stops dancing to greet him.

WISTER (*feebly*). Oh—hullo !

JONES. Sorry if I've kept you waiting.

WISTER. Oh, that's quite all right. (*Looking past JONES towards the stair with some apprehension.*) Er . . .

JONES. What's the matter ?

WISTER. Nothing. (*Suddenly*) How is Mrs. Jones ?

JONES (*slightly amused at the question*). Betty ? Well, she's—

(*He is interrupted by the appearance of WOOTON—the butler—who enters down L. bearing a tray laden with whisky-bottle, syphon, glasses, and a box of cigars. JONES welcomes the occupation thereby offered.*)

JONES (*crossing to table where WOOTON places tray*). Ah !

WOOTON (*discreetly*). I thought you might like to give Mr. Wister . . .

(*He lowers his voice beyond hearing.*) Sir.

JONES (*not understanding*). Eh ?

WOOTON (*in the same mysterious tone*). And . . . (*He opens the cigar-box and retires knowingly.*)

JONES. I see. (*To WISTER*) Whisky ?

WISTER (*consciously*). No—I don't think so, thanks.

JONES. Don't disappoint Wooton—have a . . .

WISTER (*seriously*). No, thanks, really—I'm—I mean I'm not exactly on a friendly visit.

JONES. Nonsense.

WISTER (*with pathetic earnestness*). No, it is not nonsense. I assure you—I'm . . .

JONES. We gave the Boer commanders a drink when they came out to arrange terms, and that wasn't a friendly visit by any means.

WISTER. That was a different matter, Jones. They hadn't got to consider the possibility that their wives might be watching their attitude from the next houseboat.

(*JONES smiles slightly.*)

WISTER (*hastily*). No, I'm not joking, old man. Muriel is really very upset.

JONES (*sympathetically*). I am sure she must be.

WISTER. Of course, I understand that you are not trying to win me over. I—I'd have a drink with you with pleasure, Jones—I'd like to. But I couldn't do it with the feeling that she might be watching me. She's relying on my—support—in this matter, and to let her so much as dream that I was disloyal—well, it would be brutal.

JONES. I understand. I am more sorry than I can say for what has happened.

WISTER (*non-committally*). Yes.

JONES (*sitting wearily left of table L.C.*). Women are queer cattle, aren't they ?

WISTER (*whole-heartedly*). They are. (*Hastily*) Though, mind you
—Muriel has had enough to make her . . .

JONES. I was not generalising from *your* wife, Wister.

WISTER (*hastily*). No, no, of course not. (*After a pause*) How is Betty?

JONES. She's lying down. Gone to bed, in fact. (*Seriously*)
She's really quite ill, you know.

WISTER (*agreeing enthusiastically*). Oh, I know.

JONES. Though what the dickens has taken her . . .

WISTER. It is astonishing, isn't it? I was more than astonished
—I'd never have believed she could have gone on so! Her
eyes were absolutely black! (*Depicting the scene vividly all
over the stage.*) We were sitting together on deck in those
two little basket-chairs of ours—you know—and she—walked
up to Muriel . . . Well, I can't show you how she looked
because I should simply look ridiculous, and I assure you she
looked anything but ridiculous. She—I'd never have believed
it possible! I've always thought of your wife as a—you know
what I mean—*Mental Character*! all Wit and Taste and Charm
—abstract qualities rather than—Beauty and so forth. She
seemed to me typical—I believe I've said so to you—she seemed
to me typical of the spiritual trend of modern life—not ascetic
—I don't mean that, but—spiritual. Well, some people call
it superficial, but they're wrong—she's more than just *super-
ficial*—she's *metaphysical*—no, I don't mean that either—
abstract—non-material. You'd expect her to use abstract—
non-material metaphors and . . . (*Frankly*) Well—what I
mean to say is—her language to Muriel was not at all what
you'd have expected.

JONES (*gravely*). So I understand.

WISTER (*brought to earth by the pain in the other's tone*). I'm awfully
sorry for you, old man.

JONES. That's all right. Go ahead with what you wanted to
say.

WISTER. Well—it amounts to this. (*Embarking*) Of course, I
know it doesn't really affect one's character to be called names
by someone . . . (*Pauses.*)

JONES. Someone who is not responsible for their actions?

WISTER. Well, she really wasn't, you know.

JONES. I'm glad you think so.

WISTER (*resuming helplessly*). Well, as I have said—although
it can't really affect one's character to have it attacked
by someone who is not responsible for their actions—still
(*weakly*)—it isn't nice, you know.

JONES. In short, you want an apology.

WISTER (*apologetically*). I know it's . . .

JONES (*almost smiling*). My dear fellow, you are quite entitled
to one.

WISTER. I am very glad you look at it in that way. It's a mere form, of course—I'd never have bothered you for one, only—Muriel's very upset . . .

JONES (*formally*). Well, I apologise most profoundly to Mrs. Wister for my wife's . . .

WISTER (*miserably, as the form of the apology dawns upon him*). Yes—but . . .

JONES (*stopping*). Well?

WISTER. You didn't do it.

JONES (*more gravely*). You mean to insist upon Betty apologising personally?

WISTER (*protesting*). My dear fellow—don't talk as if I were so inconsiderate. I've got to consider how Muriel will look at . . .

JONES (*just a little impatiently*). Very well, Mrs. Wister insists . . .

WISTER (*now genuinely frightened*). Oh no, Jones, that's not fair to Muriel. She's not insisting—she's not asking—she's not so much as *saying* anything in the matter. She's refused to—she's far too upset—and, after all, I am her husband. She has left me to do whatever I think best, and I'm taking the only course that I consider appropriate to the situation. *I'm insisting. I . . .*

JONES. Yes, yes . . . Well. I'm very sorry, Wister. I've already shown Betty your note, and she refuses most decidedly to apologise.

WISTER (*triumphantly*). I told Muriel she would!

JONES (*even his gravity shaken by this—after a pause*). Well, you were right. You will be able to tell her that.

WISTER (*coming down to earth again and preparing to face the situation like a man*). No, I—no. I—er—I mean (*heroically*)—I'm afraid I've got to be firm, Jones. I suppose it wouldn't be any use if I gave her time?

(*The connection between this last and being firm brings a puzzled and inquiring look into JONES'S face.*)

WISTER (*explaining*). Give Betty time to . . .

(*BETTY appears up the steps R. and steps on to the deck behind WISTER, who is too absorbed to notice her.*)

WISTER (*innocently*). You say she's quite beyond reasoning with at present?

JONES (*leaping from his seat. He has seen BETTY approach, and quite appreciates the sudden lift of her eyebrows and glance in his direction at this last.*) No, I do not say anything of the sort! Hang it all, Wister! I haven't so much as used the words.

WISTER (*amazed at the other's vehemence*). What's the matter? What . . . (*following JONES'S eye, he encounters BETTY just behind him. He gives a slight start, a feeble laugh, and is silent.*)

BETTY. You needn't be afraid, Teddy. I shan't interrupt. (*Crossing to a chair which is a little way from the others L.C.*) I only want to sit quietly somewhere where I can hear what Ivor is saying and save him from promising anything that he can't perform. (*Sits.*) Go on just as if I were not here, please.

WISTER (*taking his eyes from her face with difficulty*). Er (*to JONES, on whom his glance has fallen*)—what were we talking about?

BETTY (*helpfully*). I think the last thing you said was—"You say she's quite beyond reasoning with at present."

JONES. Yes—but I hadn't. Wister, be fair! You know I hadn't said anything of the sort.

WISTER (*not in the least understanding the other's excitement and sticking to his guns mechanically*). I think you implied it. I mean—well, I certainly have the impression . . .

JONES. Well, you put it into your own head, then. Good Lord, man! It sounds as if I'd held out hopes of inducing Betty to apologise to-morrow—or next week—or sometime.

WISTER (*the awful possibility occurring to him for the first time*). Well, don't you?

JONES (*furiously*). No, I don't.

BETTY (*with gratification*). Well, that's something.

WISTER (*almost wailing*). Then what are we to do?

BETTY. Go without an apology.

WISTER. But I can't.

BETTY. You'll have to.

WISTER. Jones, if this is final (*appealingly*)—is it?

JONES. Betty says so.

WISTER. Is it, Betty?

BETTY. It is.

WISTER. Then I am afraid I shall have to make myself beastly unpleasant. I'm afraid I shall have to consult my solicitor.

BETTY. I don't believe you've got one.

JONES (*turning to her*). Betty, I thought you weren't going to interrupt?

BETTY. I can't help it. The sight of poor Teddy trying to bluff is too much for me.

WISTER (*appealingly to her*). Oh, Mrs. Jones, I am not trying to bluff! I have got a solicitor.

BETTY. Very well, go ahead and consult him.

WISTER. But I don't want to! I want to spare us all the—the—well, to say the least, the annoyance—I want to spare myself the annoyance. Do you know, I came down here for quiet? M—Betty, we are old friends! I ask it as a favour—not to Muriel, to me—put your pride in your pocket . . .

BETTY. Don't wear pockets.

WISTER (*almost weeping over her callousness*). Oh, why, why?

BETTY. No room for 'em, I suppose.

WISTER. Don't—take me up so (*suddenly*)—there! that's just what's the matter with you! Egoism! Yes, you are! You're egoistical. You're so centred on what you think and feel that you can't be bothered with what other people are struggling to express. All you can do is to pick flaws in the way they do it. Surely—surely you can realise that what I meant was put your pride on one side—forget it . . .

BETTY (*calmly*). You're wonderfully intelligent, Teddy, but I wish it didn't always make you cry.

(WISTER *opens his mouth to speak again. She anticipates him with some impatience.*)

BETTY. Oh, of course I knew what you meant!

WISTER. Then why couldn't you listen to it instead of scoring off my poor metaphors? It isn't fair. It makes me feel that it's hopeless appealing to you.

BETTY. My dear child, that's just why I do it.

WISTER. There you are! You don't want to see anybody else's point of view! You don't want to realise the unhappiness taking this to a solicitor, and perhaps into Court, will cause to poor Jones.

BETTY (*sharply*). You needn't worry about "poor Jones."

WISTER. Well, then, to me.

BETTY. And Muriel?

WISTER (*checked*). What?

BETTY. Do tell me if you think it will break Muriel's heart to see me in the dock. They do put you in the dock for libel, don't they?

WISTER. You're arguing against yourself, Betty. You . . .

JONES (*bringing a note of restraint into the conversation*). Wister, does this—I wasn't present, remember—does this really amount to a criminal libel?

WISTER. Well, it might. There is some doubt about it.

BETTY. Oh, you've consulted your solicitor already, have you?

WISTER. No—Muriel is rather an authority . . .

BETTY. Oho! She's been reckoning up how long she can get me, has she?

JONES. Betty, why will you impute such enmity—to Mrs. Wister?

BETTY. She's been a good friend to me, hasn't she?

JONES. You've done nothing to make her one. Still—I think her actions up to now have been quite natural and—

BETTY (*interrupting him*). Oh, so do I! They are just what I'd have expected.

WISTER (*genuinely pleased*). I'm glad to hear you say that. (To JONES) We are not quite clear as to what actually constitutes a criminal libel, Jones. Muriel thinks that to accuse anybody of anything criminal must be a criminal libel, whereas to accuse them of anything only—immoral—well—she's not so clear

about that. It depends upon whether an apology is offered or something.

(BETTY, who has been very near laughter several times, at last gives way to it.)

(Looking at her with gentle reproach) Of course, Betty, your brother's a K.C. ; you ought to know more than she does about these things.

BETTY. I do.

JONES. Then perhaps you'll . . .

BETTY (*happily*). I'm not going to tell you and rob some poor solicitor of his fees. You'd better pull over to the boathouse and ring up yours.

WISTER. Well—even if Muriel is wrong as to details, surely to accuse anyone of anything criminal and refuse to apologise as well—surely *that's* criminal libel ?

JONES. Wister, do you mean to say that Betty actually accused your wife of—anything criminal ?

WISTER. Well, it will look as if she had at the inquest.

BETTY (*with a roar of laughter*). The what ?

WISTER. Oh, don't—don't—the trial. Don't take me up so quickly. I'm very worried.

JONES (*decidedly*). Here. I must come with you and have a talk to Muriel.

BETTY (*stopping her laugh and speaking peremptorily*). Ivor !

JONES. Betty, you must let me act for you in this. I . . .

BETTY. If you go I shall come with you and . . .

(A MAN in a well-cut serge suit appears upon the stairs R. and inquires :)

BELASIS. May I come up ?

JONES (*surprised and turning*). What ? (*Recognising the newcomer*) Hullo ! Yes, come up.

(Shaking hands with him and putting the question with a full appreciation of its humour under the circumstances.)

What constitutes a criminal libel, Geoffrey ?

(The newcomer expresses none but the merest courtesy and surprise—he is obviously a professional man. He replies nonchalantly as he crosses to BETTY.)

BELASIS. A criminal libel, eh ? (*Shaking BETTY's hand*) How are you, Betty ? (*Returning to the subject*) Well (*seeing WISTER*)—Mr. Wallace Wister, I believe ?

WISTER (*dubiously*). Ye—es.

BELASIS. My sister introduced us at Henley last year, you may remember. My name is Belasis . . .

WISTER. Oh yes—I—you'll think me very rude. I knew your face, but—my memory's . . . (*A gesture explains that it is lost or mislaid somewhere in the vicinity.*)

BELASIS (*smiling*). You should train it.

BETTY. Come on, Geoffrey : tell them what a criminal libel is.

BELASIS (*pleasantly*). Well—any libel is a criminal libel, you know.

JONES. What ?

WISTER. Surely there is some difference between a criminal libel and a . . . (*He pauses for reply.*)

BELASIS. Only the difference of how the person libelled likes to look at it.

WISTER (*simply and sufficiently*). Good God !

BETTY (*helpfully*). What would you say generally influences their decision, Geoffrey ?

BELASIS. Well—if they are spitefully inclined . . .

JONES (*arriving at a decision independently of this last*). I think I'll come along at once and have a talk to Muriel, may I ?

WISTER. Do.

BETTY (*twinkling*). I thought you were so shocked at my imputing anything like enmity to Muriel.

JONES. Betty, I still do not see any reason why Mrs. Wister should be accused of . . .

BETTY (*dryly*). But you're taking no chances ? Quite right, dear. (*Rising.*) Well, I'm coming with you.

JONES (*hovering with WISTER up R.*) Betty ! (*In half-humorous appeal to their visitor*) Geoffrey, what am I to do ?

BELASIS (*who has gone up to the table, and is pouring himself out a whisky and soda with magnificent aloofness from the situation round him*). I seem to be plunged in *medias res* rather, don't I ? I have a rule myself ; in a case of libel never let your client meet the plaintiff in your presence, or you may yourself be called as a witness to—further libels. I don't know if my rule applies here ?

JONES. It does rather.

BELASIS. Curious. (*He returns to his syphonading of the evaporating whisky.*)

JONES. Betty, won't you let me go and . . .

BETTY (*firmly*). No, I won't. Send you to—beg me off ! Why, I'd rather apologise myself than see you grovelling to . . .

JONES (*in heartfelt appeal*). Oh, Betty, I wish you would !

BETTY. Well—perhaps I will—on conditions.

JONES (*joyfully*). What are they ?

BETTY (*after a scarcely perceptible pause, during which she reconsiders the condition and approves of it*). I'll apologise to Muriel provided she leaves the river.

JONES. Betty !

BETTY. Well ?

JONES. I am afraid the idea is ridiculous.

BETTY (*incensed*). Ridiculous ? I think it's a very sensible condition ! It's not a bit of good my apologising to her this

evening when I may meet her again to-morrow and insult her all over again.

JONES. If you really have reached such a pitch that you cannot tolerate the sight of Mrs. Wister, Betty, don't you think it would be easier if *we* were to leave the river?

BETTY (*with beautiful firmness*). I'm not going to be turned off the river by Muriel Wister.

WISTER (*miserably*). It's just like a game! I know exactly what everybody is going to say next, only I can't stop them.

JONES (*to him*). You mean that Muriel will say the same thing.

WISTER (*with conviction*). I can hear her saying it!

JONES. Well, it's quite natural . . .

BETTY (*answering WISTER, not her husband*). Oh? She wants things all her own way; does she? Apologise! Turn me off the river! Well, Teddy, you can go back and tell her that she won't get either. I've met you half-way; I've stated my terms . . .

JONES (*quietly*). You overlook the fact, Betty, that you are not in a position to "state terms."

BETTY (*sharply*). Aren't I? You *want* an apology, I don't! You've been positively begging me for one; both of you! Well, then, surely I—

JONES (*interrupting as reasonably as ever*). To us—yes. I think both Wister and I are willing to do anything in our power . . .

WISTER (*enthusiastically*). Oh yes!

JONES (*continuing*). But Muriel is neither begging nor even asking for anything, so you can't very well exact terms from her.

BETTY (*coming to a decision easily*). All right. I don't insist upon Muriel leaving the river of her own free will. Let Teddy take her away.

(*All hearts go out to WISTER, who sighs. BETTY follows it up.*)

I'll apologise to her if he will. It'll be a waste of time if he won't. We are bound to meet and . . . (*Suddenly to JONES*) You are going to take me down to the lawns to-night. She is certain to be there.

WISTER (*hastily*). I don't think she will be—she's—she was going, but . . . (*Suddenly*) Jones, I think I'll get back and see how she is. (*Turns to go and turns back.*) I suppose I'd better tell her that Betty's quite beyond reasoning at present?

JONES (*his eyes unflinchingly on BETTY*). You may say that I say she is.

WISTER. Thanks awfully.

(*He patters down the stairs and away R. JONES returns to the table and pours himself out a drink. BETTY has covered her moral defeat when he spoke last by patting up the cushions and making herself comfortable in the chair on the right of the table. BELASIS is in the chair*

L. of it. They are both, of course, at lounging distance from the table.)

JONES (*after a drink—calmly*). Well, Geoffrey, you see where we are. Now, I suppose you'd like to know how we got here?

BELASIS. No, thanks. I've got a very instructive view of the case.

JONES (*going down to the chair down R. and sitting*). Oh, you know what's happened, then?

BELASIS. No, no, no. I don't want to know what's happened.

JONES. Yes. I suppose you can guess.

BELASIS (*shocked*). Guess? Certainly not. I don't require to know. The dream of my life is to isolate the pure case from the accident to which it is attached. You have succeeded in presenting this one to me as a perfectly isolated phenomenon. It's like a . . .

BETTY (*who has not been taking any notice of them, her eyes being fixed on the contents of the table*). I suppose you'd think me perfectly outrageous if I said I'd like a good stiff whisky?

JONES (*coldly*). Not at all.

BETTY (*still looking at the bottle fixedly*). I know I don't usually . . .

JONES. You have been doing one or two things a little out of the common lately.

BETTY (*deciding*). No—I won't. I had a sort of an idea that it might buck me up, that's all.

JONES (*sarcastically*). Do you need bucking up?

BETTY. I don't know. I feel a bit—hungry, and my throat's as dry as . . . Touch that bell, Geoffrey, will you?

BELASIS (*obeying*). This weather is very trying. You are better off here than in town, though. I didn't know what it was about, but I was quite grateful for your message that you wanted to see me.

BETTY. I didn't want to see you.

BELASIS. You . . . (*Understanding*) Oh, I see! (*To JONES*) That's why you tried to be facetious in your telegram, Ivor. You know you shouldn't; you only puzzled me.

JONES. What are you talking about? What telegram?

BELASIS. Didn't . . . (*Looking from one to the other and growing discreet*) Er . . .

BETTY. Go on, Geoffrey. It's too late to be discreet now. Tell him that you received his telegram so that he can look surprised and say he never sent one.

JONES (*calmly*). Well, I didn't. What was the telegram you received, Geoffrey?

BELASIS (*producing telegram and reading*). "Fancy! Your sister wants to see you!"

JONES. Eh?

BELASIS (*repeating*). Fancy! Your sister wants to see you!

JONES. Unsigned ?

(BELASIS *merely nods.*)

BETTY (*cheerfully*). You really ought to have signed it, Ivor. It's in quite your best vein.

JONES (*coldly*). Possibly, but I didn't send it. (*Rising and holding out his hand for the telegram*) May I see it ?

(BELASIS *hands it over.* JONES *stands reading it.* WOOTON *enters down L.*)

WOOTON. You rang, sir ?

(JONES *looks round, but BETTY speaks.*)

BETTY. I did. Bring me up some lemonade.

WOOTON (*turning to go*). Yes, madam.

JONES (*bringing BETTY the telegram in calm triumph*). If you look at this, Betty, you will find that it was sent from this district at twelve noon. Well, at twelve noon I was the other side of Hambledon Lock. (*His voice betrays his elation*) I can show you the lock tickets.

BETTY (*with a laugh*). Oh, those lock tickets !

JONES. Well, at least they must convince you.

BETTY. They do. Your alibi is established. Though I shouldn't have minded if you had sent for Geoffrey, so . . .

(JONES *puts the telegram on table and returns to his chair down R. as WOOTON enters with the lemonade L. He brings it to above table and places it thereon.*)

BELASIS (*sticking to the telegram-subject*). I wonder who did send it, then ?

JONES (*sitting*). Well—how about Wister ?

BELASIS. Quite possibly.

BETTY. Poor dear Teddy—I'm sure he'd like to see me well defended. Though how he had the heart to be funny . . . Perhaps he had a word to spare and . . . (*Takes telegram from table and counts words*) No. (*Reading with exaggerated emphasis*) "Fancy ! ! !" (*Looking up*) It isn't funny at all, you know ; it—well, it's cheek.

(WOOTON *has been pouring out the lemonade behind the table quietly. Perhaps his eyelid wavers at the last remark of his mistress. Anyway, JONES—who has been watching him idly—suddenly brings him into the discussion.*)

JONES. Do you know anything about this, Wooton ?

(WOOTON *draws himself quietly to attention and delivers his reply with the simple dignity and preparedness of one used to answering official inquiries.*)

WOOTON. I must plead guilty, sir ; though not intending cheek.

BETTY (*overjoyed, not to say touched*). Bless him !

WOOTON (*continuing*). I ask you to consider, sir, that I was the only man at home when the—frarcar—occurred. If I have shown hexess of zeal I hope you will appreciate the fact that I was deeply shaken by what had taken place, and that I acted to the best of my ability solely in the interest of yourself, sir, and you, madam.

JONES (*amused, but still puzzled*). Yes, but—why in the world did you word your telegram . . .

(BETTY, who is loving the whole situation, hands him the telegram, which he reads minutely before replying.)

WOOTON (*laying it on the table and continuing his evidence*). Liberties, sir, have been taken with my text. All that I wished to convey to Mr. Belasis was that I fancied his sister would like to see him.

JONES (*going over the words in his mind*). Oh, I see.

WOOTON. Yes, sir. The marks of acclamation must have been added in transit.

JONES (*dismissing him with forgiveness*). Very well.

WOOTON (*seriously to BETTY*). I hope, madam, you will exonerate me from any suspicion of cheek. . . .

BETTY. I withdraw the word unconditionally, Wooton.

WOOTON. Thank you, madam.

(WOOTON exits down L. with dignity. BETTY turns to the others with that mixture of appreciation of the joke and realisation of the essence of the situation which characterises her when her temper is not in full possession of her.)

BETTY. Poor dear! What a lot of trouble I am giving everyone.

BELASIS. Believe me, I had nothing half so pleasant to do as to come down here.

BETTY. I wasn't thinking of you. I was thinking of poor old Wooton being "deeply shaken" by the "frarcar" this morning and . . . (*The humour of it triumphs and she laughs quietly.*)

BELASIS (*to JONES*). I don't think I remember Wooton. He's not . . .

JONES. Oh yes, you do. You've always seen him in uniform, that's all. He was with me at Aldershot last year.

BELASIS (*vaguely recollecting*). Oh yes . . .

JONES. He took his discharge when I retired from the regiment and became a pekin with me.

BELASIS. Devotion.

BETTY (*rising briskly*). Well, now that he has brought you down, Geoffrey, you'll stay a day or two, won't you?

BELASIS (*chaffing her*). To watch the case—literally? Would you like me to?

BETTY. I'd like you to stay, of course (*pointedly*), but *not* professionally.

BELASIS. Thank you, Betty.

JONES (*dryly*). You may find us a little—er . . . (*He affects to be at a loss for a word.*)

BETTY (*decidedly, but not resentfully—the atmosphere is becoming less turgid, and the usual excellent BETTY is coming out on top*). No, he won't. (*To JONES*) I'll go and have your dressing-room sacked.

BELASIS. Don't sack anything on my account, *please*.

BETTY (*going*). You don't want to sleep among boot-trees.

JONES (*considerately*). Can't Wooton . . .

BETTY (*with the firmness of a good hostess*). Certainly not.

(*Exits downstairs R.*)

(*JONES watches her off courteously before sitting again.*)

JONES (*with affectionate pride*). She must look after you herself, you see.

BELASIS (*with equally keen appreciation*). She's a great hostess.

JONES. She's a perfect hostess. (*With growing enthusiasm*) She's tactful, amusing, her taste is excellent, her sense of humour—quite surprising. In fact, she's a most charming—lovable woman—and yet . . . (*A gesture supplies the reference to her recent behaviour, which is the completion of the sentence.*)

BELASIS. Oh, don't say "and yet"! Give post-hoc-propter-hoc a chance—it sometimes follows, you know.

JONES. You only know that she's made a scene, Geoffrey; you don't know the circumstances.

BELASIS. She didn't make the circumstances, Jones.

JONES (*not understanding this, but conceding it in order to get on*). No—but—well, at least you ought to know the ridiculous reason that she adduces for—

BELASIS (*stopping him with the authority of a master and something of the exquisite irritation of a dilettante*). My dear fellow, I don't want to know the reason she adduces. If this goes into court—which Heaven forbid—our first duty will be to hide the fact that Betty had adduced any reason at all for her behaviour.

JONES. She'll have to offer some explanation.

BELASIS. No, no, believe me, no! We are in England—not France. It will be a British jury which we shall have to face. In the eyes of a British jury for a woman to offer a reason for doing anything only makes her offence the blacker.

JONES (*with some impatience*). Yes, that's very nice. You don't know the reason. She swears it isn't jealousy.

BELASIS. I don't care what she swears it isn't, or what she swears it is. It has nothing whatever to do with what she did . . .

JONES (*a little obstinately*). You'd expect it to have.

BELASIS. I would not. For the very same reason she might have thrown vitriol; drowned herself; or said nothing whatever on the subject. Again: she might have insulted Mrs. Wister

in precisely this manner for a dozen different reasons—mightn't she ?

JONES. Yes, I suppose she might . . .

BELASIS. Well, then, my dear Ivor . . .

JONES. Why did she do it, then ?

BELASIS. I can answer that question if you wish.

JONES. I wish you would, then.

BELASIS. You are sceptical ? Well—of course I don't pretend to have the whole list of reasons at my tongue's end, but roughly : My sister's made this—scene—using language strong enough to warrant legal proceedings . . .

JONES (*grimly*). Bad language.

BELASIS (*accepting it undisturbed*). Bad language—well . . . (*He pauses deliberately for effect.*)

JONES. Well ?

BELASIS (*artistically*). Well : Because she lives in the twentieth century ; because she is inhabiting a houseboat on a fashionable reach of the Thames ; because it is abnormally hot—the hottest summer on record, in fact—

JONES (*interrupting almost with choler*). My good . . .

BELASIS (*stopping politely*). Well ?

JONES. You're not going to maintain that living on a houseboat on the Thames has taught Betty bad language.

BELASIS. No. That's the twentieth century. If you use your imagination, Jones, you will realise that there can be very few people at the present day who are really without a working knowledge of—bad language. (*With affected haste*) Though I do not suggest that they practise. (*Leaning back lazily*) The *milieu* and—the weather supplied other conduces : the irritations of semi-publicity ; of a small community ; of general idleness ; of physical discomfort. Then again they supplied Example. There are always "scenes" on the river, and we are still intensely imitative—apes—apes.

(JONES rises impatiently and paces the deck. BELASIS checks his flow of language to remark with a suspicion of a twinkle.)

BELASIS. You don't seem soothed !

JONES (*with aggressive candour*). I'm not. I don't see where all your theories lead.

BELASIS (*smiling kindly*). I thought you wanted to know why Betty made this scene.

JONES. I do. But your hotch-potch of subsidiary motives isn't going to tell me. (*With immense vehemence, and almost betraying an injured tone*) She says . . .

BELASIS. The fact of the matter is, Ivor, that you are very like my British jury ; you don't like poor Betty to think she has a reason at all.

JONES (*angrily*). I don't like her to think that I've been made a laughing-stock of, naturally.

BELASIS (*profoundly*). I see.

JONES (*continuing*). I haven't! I've only been commonly courteous to a neighbour. (*Appealingly*) Do you really think that a woman is so sensitive to what people think of her husband that . . .

BELASIS (*throwing up his hand*). Please don't ask me subtle questions about women. I don't profess to understand them. I am a barrister.

JONES. You have women clients.

BELASIS. I never have women jurors.

(JONES opens his mouth to reprove the wisdom of this, but BELASIS, hurrying on, forestalls him.)

BELASIS. I am not being cynical. I must talk a language that my jury will understand. I must confine myself to suggesting Love as the motive for a woman's actions when they are benevolent, and jealousy when they are—not. (*With meaning*) Just as you seem to want to do, only . . .

JONES (*despairingly*). Only she swears she *isn't* jealous.

BELASIS (*helpfully*). All jealous people do that.

JONES (*turning to him, puzzled*). You think she is, then?

BELASIS. I say I think all angry women are. It's a labour-saving device of mine. We are not called upon to understand her point of view; only to get her out of this mess.

JONES (*marvelling at the other's obtuseness*). But, man alive! if we once discover her point of view we *can* get her out of it.

BELASIS. Can we?

JONES. Of course! If she really has let her views get so warped that she feels it more deeply to see me—well, let us say it—made a fool of—than she would to find me unfaithful to her, all we've got to do is to re-establish her sense of proportion.

BELASIS (*with a faint trace of apprehension*). Yes. Er . . . You don't want me to help you to do that, do you?

JONES (*scarcely listening, so intent is he on his own thoughts*). No. No. If it's . . . I suppose it must be. (*Compassionately*) Poor little woman! It's awful to think that she has worked herself into such a state, and spoilt her summer over nothing—but . . .

BELASIS. She doesn't regard it as nothing if she has.

JONES (*gazing at him abstractedly*). Yes—as you say—her sense of proportion is warped. She has never known what real jealousy was, and this—this pitiful hypersensitiveness to trifles like . . . (*Generously*) You are quite right, Geoffrey. The weather has a lot to do with it.

BELASIS (*with invisible irony*). Thanks.

JONES (*shaking off his pensive mood*). I'm glad I've had this chat with you, Geoffrey. It's something to have come to a definite conclusion, however unpleasant it may be. (*Sits.*) I don't like to think that I have upset Betty by making an ass of myself; still, I can take a definite course now—and once Betty sees how ridiculous it is for reasonable beings to make scenes over such trifles—she'll apologise to Muriel and . . . (*A wave of the hand concludes the matter.*)

BELASIS. You think so?

JONES. Oh yes. Betty is obstinate, but only when she thinks herself in the right—as she does at present.

BELASIS (*nodding appreciatively*). And you're just going to persuade her she's not.

JONES (*perfectly simply and confidently*). Yes. It's her sense of proportion. She has some excuse. I dare say it's a bit trying for an intelligent woman to see her husband turned into an errand boy.

(*A pathetic voice precedes MR. WISTER up the stairs.*)

WISTER. May I come up?

JONES (*rising*). Hullo! Yes, come along.

(*WISTER gains the deck.*)

WISTER (*glancing at the table*). I wish you'd give me just a little soda-water.

JONES (*going to table*). Certainly. Is this a friendly visit, then?

WISTER (*sufficiently*). She's lying down. (*Receives the drink from JONES and puts it to his lips.*) Thanks. Oh . . . you've given me whisky.

JONES. I'm sorry.

WISTER (*accommodatingly*). It doesn't matter; only I've had one or two already since . . . (*Drains the glass.*)

(*BETTY climbs smiling on to the deck. She has quite lost the feverish, angry mood, and even shaken off the sarcastic, cruel humour which has been more on the surface. It is obvious that left alone she might seek peace herself.*)

BETTY. Well, Teddy, come back to see if I am more reasonable?

WISTER (*very gravely*). Betty, don't joke. This is getting very, very serious.

JONES. How?

WISTER (*to BELASIS*). I do hope you are wrong about a libel being criminal or not, just as the aggressor likes to take it.

BELASIS. It is usually the—aggrieved who . . .

WISTER. Yes—I mean the aggrieved. Muriel is the aggrieved, isn't she?

BETTY. I wonder you can forget that, Teddy . . .

WISTER. Betty, I—Jones, listen—and don't start or anything. My nerves are simply on edge.

BETTY. Poor Teddy! It's a shame.

(*She takes her first place L.C. JONES the chair down R. BELASIS is still seated between BETTY and the table.*)

BETTY. Now, then, Teddy, go ahead—what is it?

WISTER (*sitting R. of table and addressing the others seriously*). Well, though you know Muriel is leaving all this affair to me—refusing to so much as express an opinion—still, I am, in a sense, controlled by her . . .

(*BETTY snorts once and is silent. WISTER addresses himself earnestly to her.*)

WISTER. I don't mean she controls me intentionally, but I must clear things up in a way that she can understand and appreciate. I am controlled by her point of view. (*Wavering towards JONES*) Of course, as far as I am concerned . . .

JONES (*cutting him short*). We quite understand. Go ahead.

WISTER (*bracing himself up*). Well—well, I can see that Muriel thinks that since the law gives me no guidance in deciding whether to class this as a criminal libel or a religious one . . .

(*BETTY laughs. He looks at her reproachfully.*)

WISTER. I mean a . . .

BELASIS (*quietly*). A civil one—go on, Mr. Wister.

WISTER. Well, we are compelled to trust to our natural sense of justice, which had already told us that to accuse anyone of anything criminal ought to amount to a criminal libel even if it didn't. Of course, she didn't say that in so many words, but I could see that it was what she thought.

JONES. Quite so.

WISTER. Well—so unless you apologise . . .

BETTY (*encouraging him*). Well?

WISTER. Well, I shall ring up my solicitor now.

BELASIS (*gently*). You won't find him at his office.

WISTER. I know his private address. He does lots of little things for us. (*Tragically*) That's it. That's what I'm coming to! It's awful!

BETTY (*interested*). What is?

WISTER (*preferring to address JONES*). Jones—while we were at Henley someone rang my wife up at the hotel and told her over the 'phone that they had heard some people in the next punt to theirs at the regatta saying the most awful things about her.

JONES. Who?

WISTER. We don't know. They wouldn't say.

JONES. Well, who rang you up?

WISTER. We don't know. They rang off.

BETTY (*calmly*). How very annoying.

BELASIS (*classifying it*). A river habit—interesting, but—irrelevant, surely.

WISTER. No! That's it! Pertram—our solicitor—has that case in hand. Can't you see how it will prejudice the case against Betty?

BELASIS. No (*dismissing the notion*).

WISTER. Oh, good gracious, yes! Muriel is being cross-examined.

"Have you ever been libelled before?" Reluctantly—"Yes."

"Will you give us particulars?" Well, of course, she has to do so. Then—"You do not suggest that this libel emanated from Mrs. Jones also?" "Oh no!" (*Terribly*) "But you cannot be sure that she was not responsible for it?" (*Apprehensively*) Well, you know, Muriel couldn't swear that she was.

BETTY (*who has hardened to ice in the few moments' exposition of WISTER's fears for her safety*). I am certain she couldn't. (*With dangerous brightness*) All right, Teddy. I shall spend the autumn in prison.

WISTER. Betty!

BETTY. You don't think I'm going to be frightened into apologising—do you?

WISTER. Betty—don't talk as if I were a—villain!

BETTY. What else are you? Plotting and planning to make things look worse than they really are in the hope that you can frighten me—you dirty little blackguard! (*Suddenly trying to pull herself together and becoming more exasperated and less tense*) I do think it's too bad! Here it is the hottest weather I have ever been through, and everybody seems to be conspiring to keep me in a raging temper! (*She sits back in her chair determinedly.*)

BELASIS. Let me give you some soda-water . . .

BETTY (*furiously*). Ss—! (*Appreciating that it will give her something to do*) Thank you.

(*BELASIS tactfully brings her a little soda-water in a glass and she sits sipping it feverishly but fairly quietly while JONES, rising to the situation, takes WISTER gently but firmly by the arm and leads him down R. away from her.*)

JONES (*speaking with healthy authority*). Look here, Wister. This has gone far enough. Betty has refused to apologise, and I am certainly not going to try to induce her to, now that you have started threats.

WISTER. Jones . . .

JONES. Oh yes, I know; it's Muriel. Don't you realise that both these women are (*checking the word and substituting*)—not responsible for their actions? They would neither of them be behaving like this if it were not the hottest summer on record. And if you're a man of any sense you must see that

life here on the river is not soothing. There's the publicity of it. The small community . . .

WISTER (*agreeing enthusiastically and sincerely*). Quite so, old man! I've always said so myself.

JONES (*lowering his voice*). Look here, I'll tell you something—you'll see how absurd the whole affair is. All this scene is because Betty thinks that by dancing attendance on Muriel I have made myself look ridiculous. . . .

WISTER (*interrupting ecstatically*). Oh, I *knew* that! I've been watching you, and I could see that it was driving her frantic, poor soul! We don't understand the unselfishness of women, Jones! They watch over us like little children, only it's our dignity that they . . .

JONES (*severely*). Look here, Wister, pull yourself together. You've had too many whiskies—I should say. Don't talk any more rot or I shall be losing my balance next, and then Belasis will be the only sane person on two houseboats. You go back and have a sleep and come back in the cool of the morning and tell us that all this solicitor nonsense was bluff and that you'd had too much to drink—we'll believe you. And if you like to ask Betty quite courteously, *then*—well, I'll guarantee that she will apologise, but if you say another word about libels—I'll pitch you into the river!

WISTER (*from the bottom of his heart*). I wish you would.

JONES (*in complete control of the situation*). Geoffrey, see Wister into his dinghy for me, will you?

BELASIS (*comprehending*). Certainly.

JONES (*giving further orders*). You ought to be dressing for dinner—
—we . . .

BELASIS (*mildly resenting the unnecessary pointing of JONES's meaning*). All right. (*To WISTER*) Can I help you?

WISTER (*preceding him downstairs*). I don't think I'm going back, just at the moment. I'm going to scull up and down for a bit.

(*Disappears from sight followed by BELASIS.*)

JONES (*after a marked pause, to BETTY*). Now, Betty, this is coming to an end.

BETTY (*pleasantly*). I'm glad—for your sake, dear. You were beginning to get quite worried about it, weren't you?

JONES (*grimly*). I was. So worried that I am going to take a very unpleasant course.

BETTY. Oh dear!

JONES. I—want to make you see this (*sarcastically*)—this shocking behaviour of mine in its true proportion, and I am going to tell you one or two things about my past life which—

BETTY. Good gracious, Ivor. Is *that* an unpleasant course?

JONES. It is.

BETTY. Then why do you set out on it with such gusto every time we have a row?

JONES (*surprised*). Do I?

BETTY. Ten times at least since you gave up your regiment you have turned that ghastly past on to me.

JONES. You have never listened.

BETTY. No, and I don't mean to now. I don't want to hear anything about it. The subject doesn't allure me. Why must you always rake it up? . . .

JONES (*getting very angry*). I didn't know that I always did "rake it up"! On this occasion I certainly do not do so without a very good reason.

BETTY (*challenging it*). Well? That is?

JONES (*suddenly becoming tender and persuasive—almost commiseratively to her*). Betty, dear, you've lost your sense of proportion. You overestimate trifles and make mountains out of mole-hills. You have never known what it was to be really jealous of me, so you magnify these trifles into—serious offences. Well, if to readjust your unhealthy point of view I tell you things which—shock you, I ask—

BETTY (*interrupting him impatiently*). Oh, for goodness' sake, stop! It's very kind of you, but I don't want to be shocked. I haven't overestimated this making a tame poodle of yourself for Muriel to teach tricks to. I couldn't overestimate it. It's degrading and awful. You may have had a ghastly past—

JONES (*protesting*). Betty! . . .

BETTY. Well, you are always hinting that you have, and I'll take your word for it. But has that ghastly past ever made you look half so—*cheap*—as you have looked this summer?

JONES. You have noticed this and . . .

BETTY. I have always noticed you, Ivor. Believe me, this is an actual thing: you hold your head a different way; you look older . . .

JONES. Well, I am older. I have given up my regiment too.

BETTY. Nonsense. You'll get your staff appointment. You've got your best years ahead of you. Do you think I am going to look on while you devote them to fetching hairpins for a fool of a woman—I've never in my life let you fetch and carry for me.

JONES. No, I know you haven't. You are right in a way. I see I have made myself rather cheap—but after all, Betty, it's—nothing to make this fuss over. It seems worse to you because you have no standard of comparison. (*Decidedly*) I must tell you . . .

BETTY. I won't be told anything. My dear boy, I know what you're going to tell me. You're going to tell me that your life has not been quite perfect. Well, you needn't; I never thought it had.

JONES. Betty!

BETTY (*hurrying on*). I've always taken it for granted it wasn't.

JONES. You've always taken it for *granted* it wasn't? You've lived with me for—Betty, you can't mean what I mean. You can't have taken it for granted that . . .

(*BETTY in all sincerity of purpose—which is not to irritate JONES, but to evade hearing—places her fingers impatiently in her ears.*)

JONES (*absolutely seeing red at this treatment*). By God! You're damn-well going to listen!

(*He pulls her hands from her head by sheer brute force, then collapses into apologies.*)

I—you—I beg your pardon, Betty. I—lost my temper. Forgive me. I suppose you can't realise how maddening it is to have anyone stop up their ears when you are trying to tell them something that you would give worlds for them not to hear.

BETTY (*with a little angry laugh*). No, I can't! I should think it would make it much easier.

JONES (*blowing up once and for all*). Laugh, laugh, laugh! Superficial! Wister was quite right about you! You skate over the surface of life—you daren't look into its depths. Well, you can go on skating and looking after my tea-table behaviour—I won't worry you with things that matter again.

(*He stamps off. BETTY remains quite still in her chair. The sun has sunk low in the heavens, and the shadows are long. From off down the R. stairs comes the voice of ALICE and that of JONES:*)

“Hullo, Alice, back already?” “Yes, I came back early in case . . . Is Betty?” “No, she's on deck. Go up.”

(*A moment's pause. ALICE comes on up.*)

ALICE (*crossing to her friend*). I'm awfully early—you said . . .

(*Kisses BETTY and looks at her in some surprise*) Crying?

BETTY (*sharply*). Crying? No! What have I got to cry about?

(*ALICE is successfully checked. At this moment WOOTON appears at top of stairs carrying a large folded table.*)

BETTY (*continuing rather incoherently*). I always knew it.

ALICE. What?

(*WOOTON has the misfortune to catch the table's end (it is very long) in the awning where it touches the deck.*)

ALICE (*crossing to him*). Let me help you, Wooton. (*She lifts back the awning and the table is released, then turning to speak to BETTY*) What did you . . .

(*But BETTY has disappeared from the deck, having bolted as soon as ALICE crossed.*)

WOOTON. I beg pardon, miss ?

ALICE (*looking after BETTY to R.*). I was speaking to Mrs. Jones, I thought . . .

(CURTAIN.)

END OF ACT II.

ACT III

SCENE

THE DECK ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, ARRANGED FOR DINNER

Flaps of the awning have been drawn down at back and to L., forming a sort of marquee open to the front and right sides, its roof extending its shelter to the centre of the deck. Under this shelter LESCELINE is putting the finishing touches to a dinner-table laid for four. A large table enough to accommodate more, and therefore allowing these generous space both to waggle their elbows and be seen by the audience—which is more important.

*The sun has set and the pearl and violet lights of evening are supplemented on the houseboat by a couple of gorgeous Chinese lanterns hanging over the stairheads R. and L., and a large standard lamp with a Chinese lantern-shaped shade above the space between the dining-table, which is L.C., and the little occasional table which has been moved to dead C., where it serves as a side table during meals on deck. Beside these greater lights, candles—*aureoles* of topaz around dark shades—decorate the table; indeed the greater part of the deck is anything but dark, only the distances are lost in a dusk against which the lights and those they fall upon stand out luminously.*

Far away a gramophone is coming to the end of a record—a soprano and tenor duet, mellowed by the distance into something quite beautiful.

(ALICE and COLONEL JONES are leaning over the rail to R. talking quietly and intermittently. He is in a dinner jacket, she in the simple dinner dress in which she returns in the previous act. A brooding awkwardness seems to be upon them. JONES is saying, as the curtain goes up:)

JONES. Yes (*giving the monosyllable a weight and value which suggest that he doesn't mean it literally*).

ALICE (*after a detaching pause*). I'm sorry if . . .

JONES (*closing the subject*). Oh, my dear Alice, you are quite right to be guided by what you consider loyal to Betty. One . . .

(BELASIS having dressed comes on deck R. JONES is between him and ALICE, so he only sees him.)

BELA. Hullo !

JONES (*turning*). Hullo ! Cabin all right ?

BELA. Quite, thanks. (*Seeing ALICE and coming down*) You don't remember me, Miss Meyne.

ALICE. Oh yes, I do. (*They shake hands.*) I'm so glad they've had the sense to get you down.

(WOOTON *enters* L., *carrying a bottle of hock to the table* C.)

BELA. (*replying to ALICE with a smile*). Oh, they haven't had the sense to. I'm (*he smiles towards* WOOTON)—I'm briefed by the Servants' Hall, aren't I, Wooton ?

WOOTON (*reproachfully*). Oh, sir !

ALICE. What do you mean ?

(BELASIS *smiles enigmatically and shakes his head*. LESCELINE *is about to exit* L. JONES *stops her with a question.*)

JONES. Is your mistress dressed yet, Lesceline ?

LESCE. (*turning* L.). Oh yes, sir. I finished fastening her dress for her a quarter of an hour ago. I think she's writing letters, sir.

JONES (*with elevated eyebrows*). Writing letters ?

LESCE. Yes, sir.

(*She exits* L., *followed after a moment by* WOOTON.)

ALICE (*seeking escape*). May I go down to her ?

JONES. Do, if you'd like to.

ALICE (*as she goes*). I don't suppose she'll mind.

(*Exits downstairs* R.)

(JONES *watches her off, then flings himself wearily into one of the basket chairs which have travelled with the table across the* C. *to* R.)

JONES (*with considerable feeling*). Isn't it marvellous how women hang together ?

BELA. (*taking the chair opposite to him*). Is it ?

JONES (*sarcastically*). Don't you consider it so ?

BELA. (*judicially*). Well, no. On certain grounds I should expect them to hang together. On certain grounds every group of units must hang together. The laws of cosmogony . . .

JONES (*irritably—in fact, angrily*). Oh, for Heaven's sake !!! You really are a most remarkable comforter, Geoffrey.

BELA. Do you want comforting ? I'm sorry.

JONES. Well, I should say that if ever a man did not want deliberate irritating . . . (*Pathetically*) You must admit it is very hard, Geoffrey. Not content with—almost telling me that her—scene this morning was due to me, Betty seems to have succeeded in inspiring Alice with the same idea.

BELA. Oh ? What has Miss Meyne been saying ?

JONES (*very injured indeed*). Nothing ! Nothing that I could get hold of, that is. We've just been chatting in the most—ordinary way, but really I've seldom spent a more uncomfort-

able quarter of an hour. She seems to base every blessed thing she says on the mutual understanding that Betty's bad language and all the rest of it ought to be forgiven freely in view—well, in view of the fact that she's married to *me*. She was so perfectly convinced that I knew it myself that I found myself agreeing with her. And I tell you, Geoffrey—I valued that girl's esteem very highly.

BELA. Perhaps her sense of proportion is warped too.

JONES (*at the stage where strong men do not weep*). Geoffrey, you—you are really!—you're inhuman. You don't seem to realise that, unlikely as the whole thing appears, we may see Betty in the dock?

BELA. Is that what's worrying you?

JONES. Is that what's worrying me! Good God, man! What do you think is worrying me? She won't apologise. I know how obstinate she can be. I tell you, I'm frightened for her.

BELA. I'm sorry. I thought what was worrying you was the fact that Betty pleaded justification—or at least extenuating circumstances.

JONES. Well, good Lord, man, *doesn't* that make it ten times worse for me? To feel . . . (*He cannot continue.*)

BELA. (*very quietly*). I'm afraid you are not the right man to get that apology out of Betty, Ivor. Your desire for it is not—single enough. You are a little mixed, in fact, as to what you want it for. If I understand Betty, she sees this and she resents it. If I were you, I should tell her quite simply that you are frightened for her . . .

JONES. My dear Geoffrey, I've done more than that already.

BELA. (*with lost significance*). Quite so. (*He gives up the argument and stretches himself.*) What a gorgeous evening!

JONES (*gloomily*). The weather has been perfect for months.

(*BETTY and ALICE are heard below R.*)

BETTY. Yes, it is cooler. . . . Ah, but I shall be colder in prison, shan't I, Ivor?

(*This last as she comes on deck followed by ALICE, and the two men rise to greet her.*)

ALICE (*coming on deck behind her*). Betty, don't!

BETTY. I want to get used to the idea, Alice. The idea is everything. (*Looking towards the table*) Shall I make you a cup?

BELA. Do.

BETTY (*ringing the bell on the C. table*). I only hope we've got some ice.

(*WOOTON comes on L.*)

WOOTON. You rang, ma'am?

BETTY. Yes; I want to make a cup. Have we got any ice?

WOOTON (*with pride*). We have, ma'am.

BETTY. Oh, that's good—and a cucumber?

WOOTON. I don't fancy there's a cucumber on board, ma'am, but I've no doubt we can borrow one.

BETTY. All right—try. You know the other things I want.

WOOTON. Yes, ma'am. Er . . . *(He pauses, looking towards JONES)*.

JONES. What is it? *(He places a chair for BETTY, who sits. ALICE is already seated.)*

WOOTON. Mr. Wister is not here, is he, sir?

JONES. No. Why?

WOOTON. Mrs. Wister's maid has come over to inquire, sir. It seems as Mr. Wister has not returned home, and Mrs. Wister is asking for him. I told her as he'd left here an hour or more.

JONES *(looking at his watch)*. Oh yes, quite that.

WOOTON. Thank you, sir. *(Exits L.)*

BELA. He said he was going to pull up and down a bit longer when he left me.

(BETTY has dropped curiously out of the conversation. When she is not being deliberately gay or rude in this act—or at least at the beginning of it—she is singularly quiet and preoccupied.)

ALICE. Poor man!

BELA. What sort of a fellow is he when he is less excited than he was to-day?

JONES *(tolerantly)*. Oh, very much the same. A thoroughly well-meaning idiot, you know, but . . . *(He dismisses him unclassified beyond this.)*

BELA. *(thoughtfully)*. Do you know, I should have described him as rather intelligent?

JONES *(surprised)*. Would you?

ALICE *(quietly)*. Of course, he is.

BELA. *(to her)*. You agree with me? Too intelligent, perhaps, I was going to say; blessed with too much insight—he writes, doesn't he?

JONES. Yes.

BELA. *(nodding)*. He lacks method, but *(turning to his sister)*—he's a great admirer of yours, Betty.

BETTY *(brought suddenly out of her trance)*. Is he? Yes—I know he is . . . *(pulling herself together)*. When did he tell you so?

BELA. Oh, I have been improving his acquaintance! He insisted upon rowing me down to the lock and back when he left here, apparently just to tell me what a wonderful and noble woman you are.

BETTY *(aggressively)*. Are you trying to make me apologise for his sake?

BELA. *(calmly and tactfully reproving her insinuation)*. No—I'm—er—not. I'm discussing a neighbour of yours who interests me slightly and mentioning as one of his good points that he admires you.

BETTY (*accepting the reproof in perfect good humour and apologising with a laugh*). I'm sorry, Geoffrey. I'm getting as defensive as an old hedgehog. But, really, everybody seems to be attacking me from a different vantage. (*With a genuine laugh*) Alice is the latest!

JONES. Oh? And what is Alice's argument?

BETTY (*scornfully*). Huh! She wants me to apologise just to show you that I know how to, or something. I didn't quite follow her, I admit.

ALICE (*expostulating*). That's not fair, Betty. What I said was: You've shown . . . (*She suddenly pulls up and recasts her sentence.*) Well—you've shown that you can be firm; now show that you can give way.

BETTY (*immensely tickled*). H'm! That isn't exactly what you said, you know.

ALICE. No—but—it's what I meant.

BETTY (*with charming severity*). Oh no, Alice! I thought that bit about having punished Ivor enough for what he'd done, was the best thing you said.

(JONES rises and strolls quietly to the rail R., where he leans with his back to them, looking up the river. ALICE watches him, then lowers her voice to include only herself and BETTY. BELASIS is not very near them, and he is leaning back in his chair smoking and not listening to them with any attention.)

ALICE (*with real reproach*). You are a pig, Betty.

BETTY. I know it. But then, you see, I don't think I have punished Ivor enough.

ALICE. Look here, Betty, you know I like you, and you know I think you've had provocation, but if you can't at least behave decently to Colonel Jones in public, I shall go.

BETTY (*looking at her, amused*). Hity-tity!

ALICE. No, I'm not joking.

BETTY. No, I know you're not. You're a regular little spitfire! All right. I'll try not to stick pins into him any more than I can help, but . . . (*She shuts her mouth expressively.*)

ALICE (*curiously*). But what?

BETTY. Oh, nothing! (*Savagely*) He really is a dunderhead, you know. I don't mean only over Muriel, but—ouh!!! (*The exclamation closes the subject and almost does justice to it.*)

(WOOTON enters L., bearing the liqueurs and other ingredients for the cup on a large tray, which he carries to the C. table—also a large cut-glass jug.)

WOOTON. The cucumber is not yet to hand, ma'am. Cook is now signalling for it. (*Arranges the ingredients on table.*)

BELA. (*who has rejoined the conversation at WOOTON'S entrance*). Signalling?

JONES (*who has also turned round*). Oh, you have no idea how clever we are on this river.

(*BETTY has risen and now reaches the table above which she stands preparing the hock-cup. The distant gramophone strikes up—a waltz.*)

BETTY (*busily engaged*). Oh, Lord! there's that instrument of torture again!

ALICE. I think it's rather pretty.

BETTY. It depends upon how one feels, I suppose.

JONES (*from the rail*). Hullo! There's Wister only just going home now.

BETTY. He'll catch it! I really believe Muriel thrashes him, you know, Alice.

ALICE. Don't be silly.

WOOTON (*standing by with the hock*). Shall I open it now, ma'am?

BETTY. Yes.

WOOTON. Thank you, ma'am, then I . . . (*He wields the corkscrew.*)

JONES (*with some surprise, still watching the distant WISTER*). No, he isn't! He seems to be pulling straight for us!

BELA (*rising and going to his side*). Who? Wister?

JONES. Yes. (*Then between laughter and annoyance*) Good Lord! What's the matter with the man? (*Calling down*) Hi! Don't ram us!

ALICE (*also rising in her place*). What's he . . .

JONES (*to BELASIS*). We'd better . . . (*He leads the way, running down the stairs R., calling as he goes*) Hold on where you are!

ALICE (*sitting again and speaking with some curiosity*). I wonder what he's come back now for?

BETTY (*still above table*). I don't know, and I don't care.

(*WOOTON exits quietly L.*)

ALICE (*looking at her friend curiously*). What has been happening, Betty? You were very wicked at tea-time, but you weren't—like this. Does poor Colonel Jones really have such a bad effect on you?

BETTY (*grimly*). *He does!*

ALICE. But why? What does he do?

BETTY. Oh, my dear, you'll have to get married yourself to find out quite how maddening a man can be.

ALICE. But surely your talking like this about going to prison . . .

BETTY (*sharply*). Talking? I'm not merely talking, my dear. If Muriel likes to take this into court I'll go to prison.

ALICE. Just for the pleasure of being a martyr?

BETTY (*candidly after consideration*). Yes—I believe it would be, just for the pleasure of being a martyr. I can just tell how those old martyrs used to go into it. "Damn you!" they said; "you think I'm just making a fuss about a trifle. I'll show you whether it's a trifle or not! I'll—I'll do six months

in the second division for it" (*Struck with a fresh idea*)
That's what I suppose the suffragettes said.

ALICE. You're not a suffragette.

BETTY. No. But I'm beginning to understand how people feel when their convictions are described as—"Betty, darling, you've lost your sense of proportion."

ALICE. Is that what Colonel Jones says?

BETTY. Yes.

ALICE. How silly of him.

BETTY. There you are! You're goody-goody enough in all conscience, and even you don't think that whether a man's faithful or not matters so enormously that making a *cavaliere servente* and a general idiot of himself doesn't matter at all.

ALICE (*sedately*). I think they both matter.

BETTY. So do I, damn it! That's where I'm beaten! Oh, Lord, this world and the things we ask of it! (*Breaking down*) Why do we want so much more than food and drink and faithfulness when we can't get even them?

(The end of this is scarcely coherent. She is on the verge of tears and has sunk into the chair above the table, putting her elbow thereon and her hand irritably to her eyes. ALICE rises and is hurrying to her with a motherly "Hush! hush!" when WISTER'S voice is heard below apparently expostulating.)

BETTY (*snorting back her tears and rising to her feet*). Oh, my patience! and here's Teddy Wister again!

ALICE (*soothing her*). You needn't . . .

(Apparently she must, though, for MR. WISTER appears on deck R. followed by JONES and BELASIS. He stands blinking after the dark of the river.)

WISTER. I say, you have got it light up here. (*Seeing ALICE, who is between him and BETTY*) It's Alice, isn't it? (*Shakes hands with her.*) I'm so glad to see you're rallying round poor Betty, Alice. It's . . . fine the way you women hang together. (*Passing her to BETTY'S side*) Making a cup? (*With a glance towards the dinner-table*) I say, Jones, can I have a . . .

JONES (*crossing to dinner-table*). You can have some lemonade. I shouldn't advise . . .

WISTER (*breaking in earnestly*). You are quite right! I've had quite enough! One glass more might be just that one glass more that's the one glass too many!

(N.B.—He is not drunk in the disgusting sense of the word, but several glasses and no food have produced an exaltation which does not accord altogether strangely with his usual enthusiastic and nervous temperament. He is merely himself in excelsis.)

I suppose you're surprised to see me back so soon?

BETTY (*with her very ready temper*). Oh, my dear man, I'm past being surprised at anything. (*She leaves her hock-cup finished and comes below table, where she sits.*)

WISTER (*shaking his head in complete comprehension*). I quite understand you.

(WOOTON *has returned, and now speaks to JONES across the lower end of the table.*)

WOOTON. Shall I lay a place for Mr. Wister, sir?

JONES (*turning, lemonade in hand*). No.

WOOTON (*persuasively*). I thought perhaps Mr. Wister might be persuaded to stop to dinner, sir.

(JONES *is just opening his mouth to reply with some severity, but WISTER, who has overheard, interrupts from R.*)

WISTER (*seriously advising*). I should certainly ask me to stop to dinner if I were you, Jones. Because I should accept, and then, there you are, you've got me.

(WOOTON *exits.*)

JONES. What do you mean?

WISTER. I know! You think I've been 'phoning to my solicitor. Well, I haven't! I've been pulling up and down the river ever since I left you, making up my mind about it. And I've made up my mind! I won't! I'm not going to! Well, if I stay to dinner after saying that, I shall look very silly if I go back on it when I'm sober, shan't I?

BETTY. When you're sober? Then you're not sober now?

WISTER (*truthfully and simply*). *In vino veritas*—not quite. Anyway, I shall be soberer to-morrow, and when a man's soberer than he has been, he often thinks he was less sober than he was when he—*wasn't*. I don't want to go back on what I'm going to say. I won't give you any more trouble, Betty. And I'm very sorry—more than sorry—to have come here with threats this afternoon.

(WOOTON *returns and lays a place for WISTER.*)

BETTY. Thank you, Teddy. I'm sorry you're not sober, but I'm grateful for small mercies.

(LESCELINE *enters L. with cups of cold consommé.*)

WOOTON. Dinner is ready, ma'am.

(BETTY and ALICE *rise.*)

WISTER (*hovering R.*). Well, am I going to stay?

BELA. (*by the rail R., where he has been since his re-entrance*). Mr.

Wister's suggestion is a public olive branch, Jones.

ALICE (*sotto voce L.C.*). Oh yes, let him stay.

JONES (*to her*). Sure you don't mind?

ALICE. Mind? No, poor fellow. You can't send him back to Mrs. Wister while he's so excited.

JONES. Well, Wooton seems to have decided for us. Come along, Wister.

(WISTER crosses to the table. BELASIS, crossing behind him, commends the invitation.)

BELA. Though of course Mr. Wister cannot prevent Mrs. Wister proceeding . . . (reaching the table and changing to a more important topic). Where do you want to put me, Betty?

BETTY (touching the L. of the table). Over here.

(ALICE has gone to the R. side of the table, JONES to the head—that is, below it, with his back to the audience—and BETTY is standing above it. WISTER is hovering between C. and the dinner-table. His place is laid between BETTY and ALICE.)

Wooton's put you here, Teddy. Sit down. I bet you're more hungry than anything else—aren't you?

WISTER. That's all that's really the matter with me. I didn't have any lunch.

ALICE (sympathetically). Well, then, of course, you poor thing.

(WOOTON, serving the consommé, comes past foot of table at this moment. JONES stops him to say quietly :)

JONES. Mr. Wister will drink lemonade, Wooton.

WOOTON (with a trace of regret). Very good, sir. (Continues serving BELASIS, etc.)

WISTER (putting down empty cup). That's a very excellent cup of consommé.

BETTY (dryly). Yes; it happens to be mine.

WISTER (covered with confusion). Oh dear, I do apologise. How could I . . .

WOOTON (placing another cup before BETTY). I have another cup here for you, madam.

WISTER. I really do beg your pardon!

BETTY. It's all right; we've only exchanged, that's all.

ALICE. You are awfully wise to eat on deck all you can, Betty.

BETTY. My dear, I'm wiser not to eat down in that saloon. It gives me the cold shivers—like one of those awful oblong restaurants. You know the sort: a door at each end and a long draught with a waiter blowing up and down it.

BELASIS. I should think a draught would be rather pleasant this weather.

(WOOTON is clearing the cups away and LESCELINE takes round the hock-cup.)

BETTY. Yes; it's the general feeling. Oh, well, I suppose I shall be glad to eat anywhere when I come out of prison.

ALICE. Betty!

(WOOTON *exits with the cups.*)

BETTY. What?

ALICE. Don't keep on about prison like that. Can't you find anything else to talk about?

(WOOTON *returns with lobster mayonnaise and a plate of sliced cucumber.*)

WOOTON (*placing the mayonnaise before JONES*). The cucumber is to hand, ma'am. (*He intercepts LESCELINE with the jug just after she has filled ALICE'S glass and tilts the sliced cucumber into it.*)

WISTER (*as LESCELINE fills his glass*). Just in time for me—I'm in luck!

WOOTON (*appreciating what's happened*). Oh dear!

BETTY (*slightly surprised*). What's the matter, Wooton?

WOOTON (*hastily*). Nothing, ma'am. I beg pardon, ma'am. (*He hurries to bring her her mayonnaise without catching JONES'S eye.*)

BELA. (*with a smile*). Do you always have lobster on the river, Betty?

BETTY. Oh no, we have salmon sometimes; don't we, Alice?

BELA. More variety than I thought.

BETTY. They both seem—suitable, somehow—and I like them. I wonder if they'll give me lobster in prison if I'm good?

BELA. I doubt it.

BETTY. They could manage me with lobster. What do they feed you on, Geoffrey?

BELA. I'm afraid I can't say. You see, I have never been in prison.

BETTY (*gaily*). Oh, you ought to have been! No, really, I do think a barrister ought to know his profession from the bottom up. Think of the authority it would give you when you came to be a judge to really know what you were giving people.

BELA. I suppose you'd think me a wet-blanket, Betty, if I offered to lay you a hundred to one in sovereigns that you don't go to prison.

BETTY. What do you mean?

BELA. To get you there a good many eventualities will have to come to pass—which look to me very unlikely to do so. Mr. Wister is not very likely to proceed against you after this very open reconciliation—and even if he does allow himself to change, the Court might be able to muster enough common sense to distinguish between a supper quarrel and a deliberate libel.

WISTER. That's just what I've said over and over again to Muriel.

BETTY. Well, she's an authority. What did she say to it?

WISTER. She said that was where you were so silly not to apologise and prove beyond question that it was just a quarrel and not a deliberate libel.

BETTY. Quite right ! I'll take your bet, Geoffrey. The jury will look at it just that way.

(WOOTON *exits L.*)

ALICE. You really shouldn't, Betty. Did you see poor Wooton's face when you were talking about prison food ?

JONES. Wooton, like me, is entering late into civilian society and its topics distress him.

BELA. Any news of the staff appointment yet ?

JONES. No, and there never will be. I shall have to find some hobby like keeping rabbits.

(WOOTON *returns and takes around hock-cup.*)

WISTER (*enthusiastically*). You do make the most wonderful hock-cup, Betty. What do you put in it ?

BETTY (*twinkling*). Maraschino ; forty-eight brandy ; cointreau—and—er—hock.

WISTER. You're a genius ! I *will* have some more, Wooton.

WOOTON (*under compulsion*). Yes, sir. (*Fills his glass ; then, hastening to pass JONES, whispers in his ear.*) Very sorry, sir. What was I to do ?

WISTER (*on his feet*). Confusion to the law.

BETTY. Oh no, Teddy !

WISTER (*firmly*). Yes. Damn it ! (*Drains his glass, standing, and sits.*)

BETTY (*to BELASIS*). I warn you, Geoffrey. Teddy's an awful anarchist !

BELA. (*trying to steady the conversation*). I have no objection to an anarchist, Betty. It's the animal calling itself progressive that I object to.

ALICE. Good gracious, that's a funny thing to say !

BELA. Oh no. The anarchist is a part of the *status quo*. There have always been anarchists. The progressive is something new and dangerous. He wants to desert the *status quo* and set up another.

WISTER. Are you so devoted to the present state of things ?

BELA. Oh no. But I realise that we cannot change them.

WISTER. Can't we ?

(WOOTON *removes fish plates and fetches cutlets, etc., which JONES helps and WOOTON and LESCELINE take around, serving vegetables, etc.*)

BELA. (*shaking his head*). No, no.

WISTER. They've been changed a few times.

BELA. Not since civilisation began, believe me.

ALICE. How can you say that with all this progress ?

BELA. All what progress ?

ALICE. Well—telephones—motors.

BELA. We mean different things by progress, Miss Meynell.
As I read it, history reveals the fact that there has been no real progress for at least six thousand years.

ALICE. Oh, good gracious !

BELA. No, really. Something like six thousand years ago ten commandments were framed embodying the sum-total of man's moral desires : to be just, to be honest, to be pure, to be truthful, etcetera, etcetera. Six thousand years have elapsed and he has neither achieved those desires, nor—which is much more significant of his moral stagnation—has he added one solitary ideal to their number. If by means of the telephone or the motor, man had drawn a little nearer to his moral code his progress would be obvious ; if he had by refinement of mind, by thought, by experiment, enunciated a single fresh tenet, his progress, though less apparent, would be even more real, but since he has done neither, man must be regarded as a stationary being for whom the preservation of the *status quo* is the only safeguard against falling back, since it is established beyond question that he cannot move forward.

BETTY (*with sisterly sarcasm*). Poor man !

WISTER (*surprisingly excited*). You're right, Betty ! I was just going to say the same thing myself. (*Leaning across and beating out his emphasis on the table*) How about woman ?

BELA. (*astonished at his opponent's excitement*). I—er . . .

WISTER (*repeating it*). How about women ? You say man has neither lived up to his moral code nor enlarged it. Granted. But how about woman ? I don't say she's lived up to it either, but then perhaps she doesn't like it. She didn't make it. But she *has* added to it, and, as you yourself say, that argues more moral sense than just following what's already been laid down. It's *active* morality. That's what women are—they are *actively* moral ! Look at the activity of Betty's Moral Perception ! Look at the sincerity of it ! The conviction ! She'd go through the Law Courts rather than deny her expression of abhorrence of Jones shopping for my wife ! Isn't that a new moral idea ?—fresh evolved ? And, mind you, it's a sound one ! It awakens an answering throb in me ! So it does in you, Alice ! We *feel* that a new moral tenet has been established. It *is* wrong for a grown man to run errands all day for his neighbour's wife ! It's revolting ! ! It isn't as if you'd just done it once, Jones—you were always doing it. Muriel had you absolutely under her thumb ! Betty *saw* the immorality of that. She didn't have to think it out, she saw it. Something said to her " It isn't right—it's wrong " ! ! ! ! That was her moral sense — active—evolving ! !

(*To BELASIS*) You say there's been no moral progress! Can you imagine an Early Victorian wife making herself ill because her husband made an ass of himself like Jones has done? No!! So long as he was faithful to her and kind to her, what did she care? It's only the modern woman who has reached such a pitch of ab—*abstraction*. That's what it is! Super-material abstraction!!! We sneer at modern women and call them superfish—superficial; it's because they soar too high for us. Spiritual detestation of the mundane world, that's what their superficiality is. They spurn the sordid depths! We call them artificial and accuse them of acting—so they do! They *do* act! They mean to be superficial! It's their idealism. All idealism is artificial. It's consciousness of the desire to ascend to a plane that does not yet exist. Very well! It has to be artificially manufactured.

Women have raised themselves a tremendous distance already. Look how immaterially we speak about them. You never talk about a modern woman's physique, do you? No; you talk about her charm. Abstract!! Abstract!!! You don't mind whether she is beautiful or not—is she smart? Abstract again!!! You think of her complexion, not her face, her figure, not her body—I tell you, women are the real æsthetics!! What do they care for their natural, material shapes? They must have the ideal curve or line that expresses the inner consciousness at the moment, and they will suffer *pain* to get it!!! The curve is the expression of the spirit—evolving—changing!! The body—they are born with it—it's a material fetter!!! That's how women feel towards all physical things! That's why they don't demand from their husbands the mere physical fidelity that he wants them to insist upon. The modern woman is above minding mere physical unfaithfulness—unless it becomes public—which, of course, endows it with spiritual significance by exposing her to ridicule. That's what she demands from him: self-respect—sensitiveness to ridicule. How sublime!!! Ridicule is the appreciation of something being out of place. It is essentially a spiritual feeling; the expression of that sense of order by which the spirit controls matter. There you are! Sensitiveness to spiritual condemnation, that's what woman asks of her husband. And does he appreciate the beauty of her demand? No!! He calls her superficial because she cannot sink to his base and ignoble morality. (*Solemnly*) Betty! Long may you remain superficial! Lifting the world to fresh planes of refinement and beauty far above the sordid materialism of Jones! (*He sits with great dignity.*)

JONES (*very quietly and matter-of-factly after a pause*). Well, now,

Geoffrey, will you go and drive the boats away, or shall I?

BELA. What do you mean?

JONES. Well, I should estimate the crowd around our houseboat at about two hundred by this time. I quite expected to hear applause when the oration ended. (*Rising.*) Is your boat below, Wister?

WISTER. I left it there.

JONES (*remembering*). Of course. Well, now, don't you think you'd better get into it and go home and have a nap.

WISTER (*rising*). I will go if you wish. But I prefer to pull up and down for a—while.

BETTY (*to JONES*). He mustn't . . .

JONES (*quietly to her*). Of course not. Would you mind if Geoffrey and I left you to finish alone?

ALICE. No.

JONES. Come along, Geoffrey. We'll see him home.

(*They escort WISTER, who seems tired, down the stairs to R.*)

(*Left alone, BETTY and ALICE sit quietly in their places.*)

(*WOOTON serves ices and withdraws.*)

BETTY (*looking at her friend*). Well, Alice, what are you thinking about?

ALICE (*surprised*). I . . . nothing . . . Why?

BETTY. You smiled.

ALICE (*amazed*). Did I?

BETTY. No, perhaps you didn't. Perhaps I only expected you to smile.

ALICE. Why?

(*JONES returns, crossing rapidly to table.*)

JONES. I want a strong knife. Wister has tied his boat up like a . . . (*He takes one up and turns away.*)

BETTY. Ivor!

(*He turns back to find her with her hand outstretched on the table towards him. He stands looking at her.*)

JONES. What is it?

BETTY. I want to talk to you.

ALICE (*rising*). Shall I go?

BETTY. You can do something for me if you will, Alice.

ALICE. Of course I will. . . . What is it?

BETTY. Bring me up a letter you'll find on the . . . No, it's in my writing-case. Bring me up the whole thing, will you?

ALICE. Of course I will, dear.

(*ALICE exits R.*)

BETTY (*after a pause, during which she has studied her husband's face quizzically*). Well, Ivor, how do you like being married to a pillar of the new morality?

JONES. The what?

BETTY. You heard what Teddy said.

JONES. I'm afraid I didn't follow him very closely.

BETTY. Oh, why not? He spoke really very highly of me.

JONES. He was drunk.

BETTY. Yes, that's a pity, isn't it? Still, he understands me much better than you do. He knows me to be an abstract, high-souled, non-material creature, impervious to anything but ridicule, while you think me—just a woman. Aren't you glad you're wrong?

JONES (*more and more puzzled*). What are you getting at?

BETTY (*obligingly*). Well, would you rather be right? It wouldn't be difficult. I nearly followed up that past of yours and broke my heart over it in a most womanly and material way.

(*ALICE comes on deck. BETTY turns to her and takes the case.*)

BETTY. Thank you, Alice.

(*ALICE exits again R.*)

BETTY (*opening her case and taking out a letter*). Listen, Ivor. (*Reads*) "DEAR MRS. WISTER,—Since raising objections to my husband fetching hairpins for you, he has informed me that he is not quite perfect. This blow having restored my sense of proportion, I beg to apologise and withdraw all objection to . . ."

JONES. Oh, Betty!

BETTY. Well, that was the lever you used.

JONES. Yes, but . . .

BETTY. But you don't like it put so plainly? I quite understand. Well, we'll put the other side plainly too. (*Dogmatically*) Ivor, I am an idealist—I detest the mundane world. I don't care how unfaithful you are to me, but you must not make yourself ridiculous. Now, then. Which will you have?

JONES. Which?

BETTY. Yes. Which shall I be, the (*waves letter*) or . . .

JONES. Neither.

BETTY. Neither? Oh, Ivor, don't you want me to care about you at all?

JONES. No, I don't mean that. Both.

BETTY. Both! A jealous materialist *and* an exacting idealist? Oh, Ivor, I'm glad you want both, because I'm afraid that's what you've got! (*Suddenly she changes her tone, holding out her hands to him.*) Dearest . . . that ghastly past upsets me very much, but the silly present upsets me too. I want—as many perfections . . . (*Suddenly, quaintly*) Well, I suppose I want all I can get.

JONES (*appreciating the humorous turn she is giving to it*). I'll do what I can for you. (*He bends and kisses her hand.*)

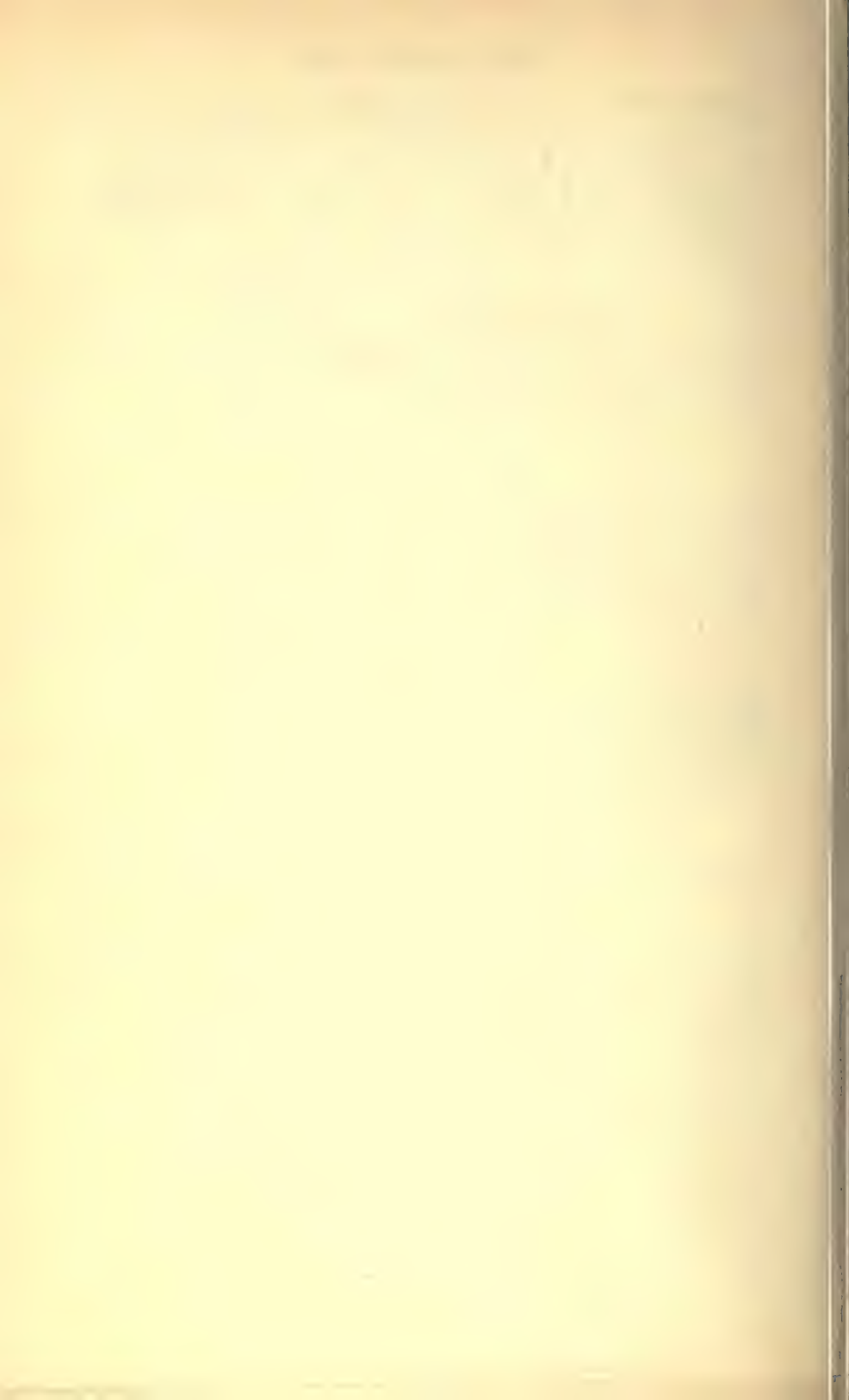
(*From below R. comes a loud splash and a faint shout.*)

JONES (*turning and moving towards it*). Hullo, what's . . .

BELA. (*merely putting his head above the deck's edge, R.*). The orator has fallen into the water.

BETTY (*laughing*). Fish him out, please. We want him to take a note to Muriel. Don't we Ivor? (*She opens her case and selects a sheet of paper.*)

(CURTAIN.)



ART AND OPPORTUNITY

COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

CHARACTERS

ALGERNON HORATIO GOSSAMORE, THIRD DUKE OF KEELS.

GEORGE FREDERICK GOSSAMORE, EARL OF WORPLESDON, *his Cousin.*

ALGERNON GEORGE FREDERICK GOSSAMORE, *Son to the Earl.*

LADY O'HOYLE, *Aunt to the Cousins ; a Gossamore by birth.*

HENRY BENTLY, M.P., *the Duke's Secretary.*

PAULINE CHEVERELLE.

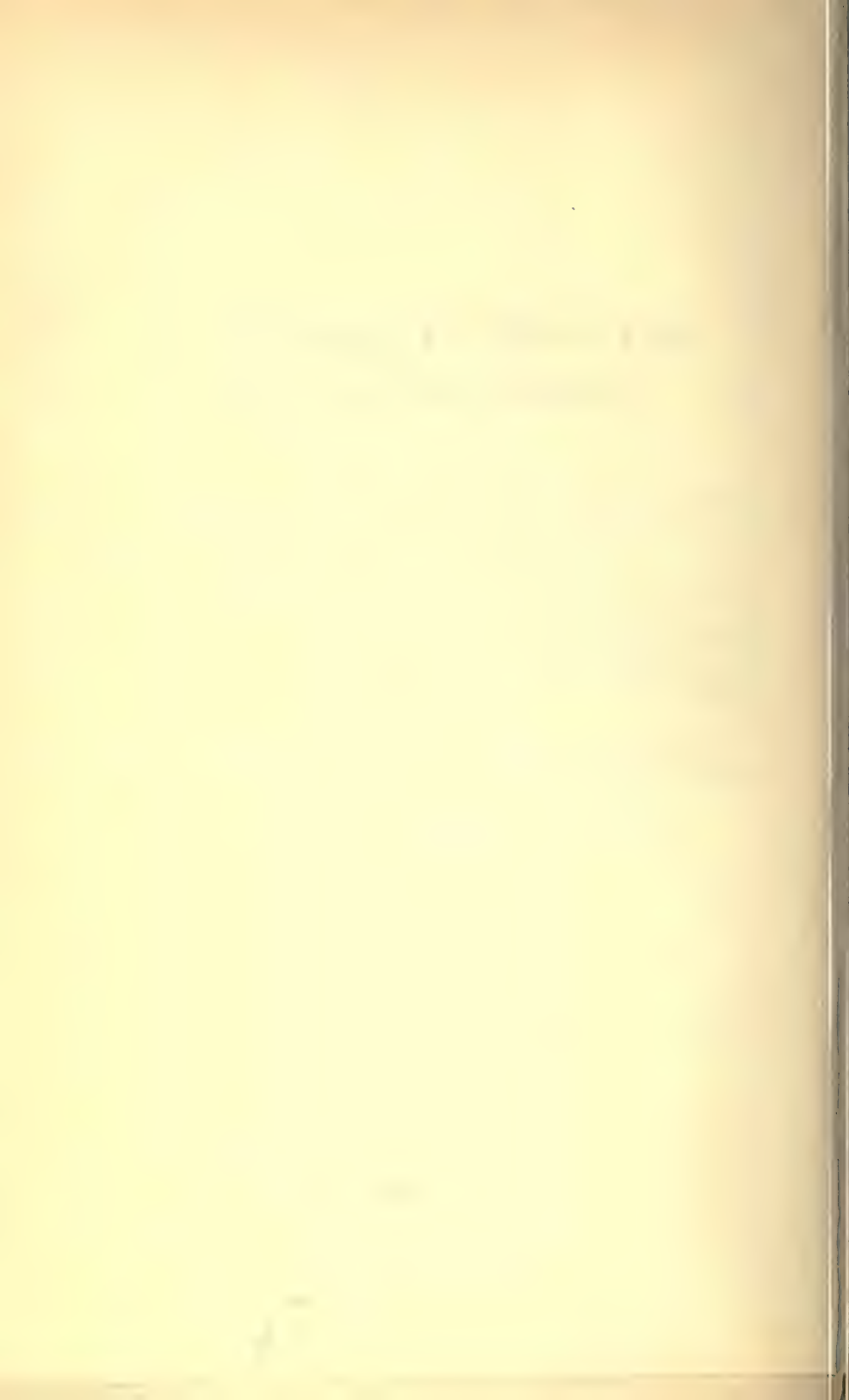
TENBY.

The action of the play takes place at Eftswood, Lord Worplesdon's place in Surrey. The times of the three acts being :

ACT I.—*Between 6 and 7 p.m. on a Wednesday in July.*

ACT II.—*Before breakfast the next morning.*

ACT III.—*After lunch the same day.*



ACT I

SCENE

THE HALL AND STAIRCASE OF EFTSWOOD

The great front door stands open R.; the staircase curves from C. to up L., where it joins a gallery extending across back. There are two doors opening on to the gallery, and a curtained opening at the L. end of it leads to the rest of the upper floors of the house.

There is a door below the stairs L. leading into the dining-room, and another exit up L.C. leading into the servants' quarters.

On either side of the front door there is a stained-glass window. Through these, and through the open door, the slanting rays of the sinking sun fall upon the well-polished oak staircase and the handsome Stuart furniture: A day-bed, or cane-seated settee below the staircase L.C., a couple of high-backed chairs up R., and two handsome oak chests serving as window-seats on either side of the front door. There are rugs on the floor, and a rich red carpet climbs the stairs.

The walls are oak-panelled and carry a few choice pieces of old brass: a warming-pan, a tinder-box, and a pair of candelabra.

The curtain rises on an empty stage, but there is a scrunch of feet on the gravel outside, and in a few seconds LORD WORPLESDON enters through the open door.

He is a fairly tall man of fifty-one or two—lean, and with a slight inclination to stoop. His hair is more grey than one would expect from his face, and his moustache—close-trimmed about his mouth—is only slightly grizzled. His hands are slender and white.

He wears a perfectly cut but loosely comfortable lounge suit of light grey tweed. His tie and collar are snowy white. A fine chain from his buttonhole to his outside breast-pocket suggests pince-nez. His manner is quietly pleasant and reserved, with an inclination to be dryly and kindly humorous—a well-bred man of the studious rather than the sporting, country-gentleman type; of position and family, and possessed of a very comfortable income.

He enters carrying in his hand a soft grey hat and an ash stick which he hands to a footman who enters from up L. to meet him.

WORPLESDON. I missed them. (*He is obviously fatigued and sits on the chest in the window below door.*)

TENBY. Yes, Melord. His Lordship and the—lady arrived about ten minutes ago.

(*A young gentleman appears upon the gallery, entering by one of the doors. He is ALGERNON GEORGE FREDERICK GOSSAMORE, only son of the Earl downstairs. A nice-looking youngster of twenty-three, of a rather sporting type. He only resembles his father in his general well-bredness and in the curious configuration of his nose—it is the Gossamore nose.*)

He wears a well-cut lounge suit of a sporting pattern, an eye-glass, and his hair is sleeked back. An imitation of him would be a bounder, but he does it quite naturally, and is thoroughly likeable. Hearing the voices below he leans over and hails his father as the servant retires with the hat and stick.)

ALGERNON (*on gallery*). Hullo, Dad!

WORPLESDON (*looking up*). Hullo, young man! You dodged me very neatly.

ALGERNON (*with sincere regret*). I know: Tenby told me I'm awfully sorry. I'd no idea you'd come to meet us. We cut over the hill and round through the woods.

WORPLESDON (*with a twinkle*). "Cut?"

ALGERNON. Well . . . it's pleasanter that way. Did you get right to the station?

WORPLESDON. Nearly. I met the car, and Jarrat told me you'd set out to walk.

ALGERNON. Did you come back in the car?

WORPLESDON. No, I'm sorry to say I didn't.

ALGERNON (*sympathetically*). Fagged?

WORPLESDON (*admitting it reluctantly*). Yes, rather.

ALGERNON. It's only a mile and a half.

WORPLESDON. Only a mile and a half—and I'm winded! Eheu, *fugit irreparabile tempus!*

ALGERNON (*descending the stairs slowly*). It's a tiring sort of day.

WORPLESDON (*quizzingly*). Did you find it so, coming round by the woods?

ALGERNON (*still descending step by step*). Oh well, I had company.

WORPLESDON (*nodding perceptively*). All too short. I know! (*Reminiscently*) I've—"had company"—too, young man.

ALGERNON (*reaching foot of stairs*). I'm sure you have, Dad.

WORPLESDON (*regarding his son humorously*). Do you know why I came to meet you and Mrs. Cheverelle?

ALGERNON. It was awfully decent of you.

WORPLESDON. Thanks. But it wasn't just for hospitality's sake. I came to warn you!

ALGERNON (*unnerved*). Warn me ? What about ?

WORPLESDON (*his smile deepening*). Who do you expect will be the first member of the family—beyond myself—to inspect your future wife ? . . .

ALGERNON (*sitting on the chest by his father and drumming his heels against it*). Aunt Mary. Bet a hat on it !

WORPLESDON. You would win. And how soon do you expect Mrs. Cheverelle will have to undergo that ordeal ?

ALGERNON (*gloomily*). Within the week . . . I know Aunt Mary.

WORPLESDON. Say within the hour . . .

ALGERNON (*jumping from his seat and facing his father*). What ? . . .

WORPLESDON. Your Aunt Mary is upstairs now, recovering from the effects of a cruelly fast drive over from Pitt Place.

ALGERNON (*angrily*). What's her hurry ?

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). She says a stitch in time saves nine.

ALGERNON. Why, we might have run into her unawares ! And you came to warn us ! I say, you are a brick, Dad !

WORPLESDON. Thank you.

ALGERNON. It's a bit rough on Peter, isn't it ?

WORPLESDON. Peter ?

ALGERNON. I call her Peter . . . Mrs. Cheverelle, you know . . . short for Pauline.

WORPLESDON (*gravely*). I see.

ALGERNON (*still enthusiastically*). You're a brick to stand by us, Dad. It isn't as if you knew her, even. It's jolly decent of you !

WORPLESDON (*gratified*). I don't think I'm standing by you to any very great extent, my boy. I want to treat you fairly and reasonably.

ALGERNON. Well, that's unusual enough in a father.

WORPLESDON (*smiling and continuing*). I could scarcely expect you to respect my wishes if I objected to your engagement to Mrs. Cheverelle without so much as having seen her. But (*more gravely*)—Algernon—if *after* seeing her I *then* am unable to consent to your engagement, I hope you will appreciate the fact that I am speaking—not from any prejudice against her because she is a widow, or because she is of no family—I could do that now—but from—

ALGERNON (*interrupting cheerfully*). I know, Dad ; you mean you'll judge her on points and not on pedigree. That's all right. It's as good as settled, then.

WORPLESDON (*relaxing into a smile*). I hope so, I'm sure, my boy. And when shall I have the pleasure of meeting her ?

ALGERNON (*looking up the stairs and off L.*). I'm hanging about for her now. She said she'd dab some powder on her nose and come straight down.

WORPLESDON (*musings*). Your aunt said she would bathe her eyes.

ALGERNON (*returning to his annoyance with his aunt*). Confound her—it, I mean! Rotten of her coming round the first day like this. Disrespectful to you, too. She ought to have given you time to see whether you were going to object or not before shoving in her oar.

WORPLESDON. She knew I wouldn't.

ALGERNON. How could she?

WORPLESDON. Well . . . she said she knew I wouldn't.

ALGERNON (*going gloomily to settee below stairs, L.*). She'll hate Peter. Women always do.

WORPLESDON. Oh?

ALGERNON. Yes; she's not a woman's woman, you know. She's too clever for 'em.

WORPLESDON. Clever?

ALGERNON. Rather. She can do what she likes with you.

WORPLESDON (*reflectively*). H'm.

ALGERNON (*scenting disapproval*). I say, Dad, you're not going to be prejudiced against her just because she's clever?

WORPLESDON. No, I'm not. (*Quizzing his son*) So you've found out that she can do what she likes with you? You're wiser than I was at your age.

ALGERNON. Bless you, Dad, I didn't find it out! She pointed it out to me.

WORPLESDON (*eyebrows up*). She pointed out to you that she always got her own way?

ALGERNON. Yes.

WORPLESDON. But why?

ALGERNON. To convince me it was no good trying to stop her.

WORPLESDON (*with a laugh*). Ha, ha! you spotted that!

ALGERNON. Yes—she pointed it out to me.

WORPLESDON. Wait a minute! (*He places his palm over his closed eyes for a moment in burlesque thought, then uncovers them again with a shake of his head.*) This is a new type of the problem.

ALGERNON (*very anxious to remove the false impression*). Oh, she's not a problem, Dad. She's the most transparent creature I ever met. She lets you see the motive for every blessed thing she does. And she's awfully truthful. She fairly begged me to tell you nothing but the exact truth about her.

WORPLESDON. Yes?

ALGERNON. Yes. "Tell your father the whole truth about me," she said. "Then I'll be such a relief to him when he sees me that he'll think me quite nice."

WORPLESDON (*laughing*). Really!

(PAULINE CHEVERELLE *enters through curtained opening on to gallery. She has heard this last speech of ALGERNON'S, and as she comes down the stairs she speaks to LORD WORPLESDON without waiting to be introduced.*)

PAULINE. Well . . . and aren't you ?

(LORD WORPLESDON rises. She takes his outstretched hand as she reaches the foot of the stairs. She is a fascinating little woman, probably twenty-eight to thirty years of age, but looking in some respects younger and in some respects older. She is beautifully gowned. There is no attempt at an introduction from ALGERNON, who has risen and merely looks on. She still holds LORD WORPLESDON'S hand, and, looking up into his face, repeats, with a touch of entreaty in her voice :)

PAULINE. Aren't you ?

WORPLESDON (*courteous and visibly impressed*). I am certainly pleased to see you.

PAULINE. And relieved ? Oh, say that you are relieved, too, or I shall think that Algy has not given you a sufficiently truthful account of me.

WORPLESDON (*smiling down at her*). He has been telling me that you were too clever for most women, and that you always got your own way with people.

PAULINE (*simply*). Only with men. Now I want you to admit that you're tremendously relieved at my appearance. I don't look as bad as I sound, do I ?

WORPLESDON (*laughing and protesting*). My dear Mrs. Cheverelle.

PAULINE. Well, then, say how relieved you are. (*She waits a second, looking up into his face.*) I want you to.

WORPLESDON. To say it just because you want me to would rob the—statement of its sincerity. I would rather have said it without any compulsion. (*With convinced sincerity*) I do say it without any compulsion. I am exceedingly relieved.

PAULINE (*with a touch of pleased surprise at the compliment*). Oh . . . that's very nice of you ! (*She turns away from him to hide her lack of blushes.*)

ALGERNON. Come and sit here, Peter.

PAULINE. Mayn't I sit on the stairs ? I look ever so much more bewitching on the stairs. (*She sits on the stairs.*) You don't mind my sitting on the stairs, do you, Lord Worplesdon ?

WORPLESDON. Since you always do what you want to, why ask me ?

PAULINE. So's to have someone to shift the blame on to if I get into trouble for it.

WORPLESDON. And who are you likely to get into trouble with ?

PAULINE. I dunno . . . (*Looking brightly from one to the other*) Aunt Mary ?

ALGERNON. You know she's here ?

PAULINE (*nodding*). The maid who unpacked my boxes told me. (*With hasty candour*) Of course, I asked her. You know how inquisitive I am.

WORPLESDON. I fancy we all are. (*Reassuringly, but with a touch of sarcasm*) I don't think you need be afraid of Lady O'Hoyle, Mrs. Cheverelle.

PAULINE. Oh, I'm not afraid of her.

ALGERNON (*gloomily to his father*). I suppose the Dook will be coming down soon, too?

WORPLESDON. I suppose so. He hasn't written.

PAULINE. I'm awfully afraid of meeting the Duke. He's such a great man. I hope I shall get on with him.

ALGERNON. Get on the right side of Bently, and you needn't worry about the chief.

PAULINE (*seeking enlightenment*). Bently?

WORPLESDON (*explaining*). My cousin's secretary—his right-hand man, in fact. He's quite invaluable both to the Duke and to the party.

ALGERNON. Especially to the party. Why, he runs the Duke. You know the kind of chap . . . brains sticking out all over him. Packed full of information. A perfect monster of method. . . .

WORPLESDON (*putting in a word of justice*). And loyal, Algernon.

ALGERNON. Oh, dead loyal. Stick at nothing to serve the people who serve him best. He's set out to make the Dook, and he's doing it—fast.

PAULINE (*her head on one side*). Why don't you like him?

ALGERNON (*rather taken aback*). Oh, I don't dislike him exactly. But—I dunno—he always makes me feel I'd like to—beat him somehow.

WORPLESDON (*smiling*). To "out him," I think, is the vernacular.

ALGERNON. But I don't *dislike* him. I—of course, I admire him. But . . .

PAULINE (*nodding*). I know. The natural antipathy of blood to brains. (*Horried at her own remark*) Oh dear!

WORPLESDON (*pleasantly*). Quite right, Mrs. Cheverelle. It's there, that antipathy. I wonder what it means.

PAULINE. No, it isn't. What I ought to have said is: of *mere* blood to *mere* brains.

ALGERNON (*laughing*). Thank you.

PAULINE. Now I've made it worse. I don't mean that either. What I mean is of blood to mere brains.

WORPLESDON. That's more palatable, certainly.

PAULINE. And it was what I meant—really, it was. Only, I suppose, being quite common myself, I gave it that nasty Radical twist. (*Looking up and catching WORPLESDON'S eye*) Well, go on.

WORPLESDON. Go on?

PAULINE. Yes, go on . . . cross-examine me. Ask me leading questions about my family, and all the rest of it.

WORPLESDON. I had no intention of cross-examining you, I assure you.

PAULINE. You looked . . .

WORPLESDON. I was thinking . . . (*Hesitates.*)

PAULINE. Yes . . .

WORPLESDON. I was thinking that you looked very young to be a widow.

PAULINE (*dryly*). Yes, that's a very good leading question, but I'm not going to tell you my age, so it's wasted.

WORPLESDON. You seem to think me rather an ogre.

PAULINE. No, I don't. I think you're very nice.

WORPLESDON. Ah, now you're flattering me.

PAULINE. Of course, I am. I flatter everyone I want to get round—if they're flatterable. You're easier to flatter than most people.

WORPLESDON. H'm . . . ambiguous.

PAULINE (*nodding deeply*). I mean it—both ways.

ALGERNON (*elated*). She is a cool proposition, isn't she, Dad?

PAULINE (*shocked*). Oh, there's an awful thing to call a poor little adventuress like me!

WORPLESDON (*laughing*). My dear . . .

PAULINE. Yes?

WORPLESDON. Do you usually describe yourself as an adventuress?

PAULINE (*nodding, with a shade of seriousness creeping into her tone*). Since I've been a widow on two hundred a year. (*With sad conviction*) So I am.

ALGERNON (*uncomfortable*). Peter. Don't.

PAULINE. Why not? (*Suddenly very earnestly to LORD WORPLESDON*) Lord Worplesdon, what do you call a young woman—a young widow—poor—of no family—and in debt—who pounces on an unsuspecting boy and makes him marry her?

WORPLESDON. But you're fond of him?

PAULINE. Answer my question. Whether she's fond of the boy or not, what do you call her? An adventuress? (*Gives him a moment to reply, then*) I hope you're not trying to think of a worse word.

WORPLESDON. No, no, no. Yes—I call her an adventuress, I suppose. (*Humorously*) But not to her face.

PAULINE (*very seriously*). I would rather you called me that to my face than behind my back.

WORPLESDON (*alarmed*). Mrs. Cheverelle—

PAULINE (*interrupting*). No—of course—you've never *called* me so. But—confess—you have thought of me so?

WORPLESDON. I confess: I have.

ALGERNON. Dad!

WORPLESDON. Well, she asked for it.

PAULINE. I did. (*Performing another quick change back to her cheerful, semi-impertinent manner*) And you're quite right: I am an adventuress. Haven't I been saying so? And now that you've called me one to my face—(*quaintly*) do you respect me any the less for it?

WORPLESDON (*losing his head*). No . . . (*emphatically*).

PAULINE. That's all right! Now I know where I am. And will you accept me—as an adventuress—as your future daughter-in-law?

WORPLESDON (*recovering himself and parrying*). My dear young lady, I hardly know you yet.

PAULINE. I improve on acquaintance. (*Very winningly*) Come, please accept me. You'll have to sooner or later, you know. I don't mean to be beaten when I've almost got him.

WORPLESDON. You mean that you will marry Algernon without my consent if I withhold it?

PAULINE (*horrified*). Good gracious, no! What an awful idea—and how uncomfortable I'd be. No. I'll marry Algy with your consent.

WORPLESDON (*nodding, mollified*). Or not at all.

PAULINE. I beg your pardon?

WORPLESDON. I said, "Or not at all." You will marry Algernon with my consent or not at all. I merely completed your sentence.

PAULINE (*firmly*). Oh no, you didn't. You tacked on a bit of your own. There's no "or not at all" about it. My sentence was: "I'll marry him with your consent." Full stop and go on to the next subject.

ALGERNON (*laughing*). You'd better give in, Dad. You'll have to in the end.

WORPLESDON (*his annoyance rising*). This is not playing the game, Algernon. Mrs. Cheverelle, I am sorry, but I must say it. This is not playing the game. The understanding was that you should pay us a visit here and that we would afterwards discuss your engagement to my son. You may think our attitude unnecessary—formal—and—and . . .

PAULINE. Oh no! Oh no!

WORPLESDON. You understand ours is a family of—national importance. We owe it to the country to consider how we make alliances. Algernon is not only my son, but he is heir to my cousin the Duke—unless my cousin marries thus late in life. I am most anxious to treat my son fairly and—sympathetically—but there was that understanding. You are not playing the game.

PAULINE (*deeply penitent*). I'm so sorry. I see I'm not. I've really no sense of honour. Isn't it awful?

WORPLESDON. I am sure you have a very strong sense of honour. But in this case . . .

PAULINE. You're very kind and forgiving, but it's no use pretending. My sense of honour simply isn't there! Of course I see now that I've been behaving most abominably.

WORPLESDON. No, no, no.

PAULINE. But I really didn't know until you pointed it out to me. (*Gratefully*) Thank you.

WORPLESDON. You make me feel as if I had been lecturing you.

PAULINE (*very humbly*). So you have ; and quite right too. Please lecture me whenever you think I deserve it ; just as you would your own daughter.

(WORPLESDON *gasps* and *is silent*. ALGERNON *smothers a gleeful chuckle*.)

WORPLESDON (*recovering and reminiscing quietly*). When I was a boy, one of my grandfather's grooms took me into Guildford to see a badger baited. I remember that the dogs evinced great joy—and got severely bitten ; and also that the badger—the groom told me that she was an experienced old lady—wound up the proceedings by allowing herself to be dragged weakly from her barrel with apparently no fight left in her. I forget exactly what followed, but the upshot of it was that one of the dogs was *hors de combat*, and the badger was back in her barrel. Conversing with you recalls it strangely to my memory.

PAULINE (*brightly*). Thank you ! Now you're calling me an experienced old lady ! (*Suddenly making a discovery—her voice taking a deeper tone*) But you're right ! I *am* like that ! I do pretend to be beaten just to—get back into my barrel. I never realised it before, but now that you point it out . . . (*Gazing at WORPLESDON*) It's wonderful ! I believe you can see through me as if I were a bit of glass.

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). Algernon tells me anyone can.

PAULINE (*with a kind glance at ALGERNON*). Anyone who—likes me, I expect.

(TENBY *enters from up L.* He addresses LORD WORPLESDON.)

TENBY. Will your Lordship speak to Mister Melch on the 'phone ?

WORPLESDON. Mr. Melch ? (*Rising.*) Grosvenor Square ?

TENBY. Yes, Melord.

ALGERNON. Shall I see what he wants, Dad ?

WORPLESDON. Yes, do, my boy.

ALGERNON. Right. (*Goes off behind stairs followed by TENBY.*)

WORPLESDON (*sitting again*). Beastly things—telephones.

PAULINE. I love them.

WORPLESDON. Yes ?

PAULINE. Yes, I love everything that helps.

WORPLESDON. " Helps ? "

PAULINE. Yes, I can't explain, but—they're useful. Whenever I see that they're getting cheaper, or that a new motor's been brought out, or a new flying record's been broken, I—crow all over.

WORPLESDON. You're a quaint person.

PAULINE. I know I am. But I'm finding out a lot about myself. I'm an experienced old lady, and I remind you of a badger. . . .

WORPLESDON (*protesting with a laugh*). I didn't say that.

PAULINE. You implied it ; and I admitted that you were right. The simile was perfect. Still, it gives me a funny feeling to be seen through like that.

WORPLESDON. You're used to it.

PAULINE (*decidedly*). Oh no, I'm not.

WORPLESDON (*reminding her*). Algernon . . .

PAULINE. Did you believe him when he told you that he could see through me ?

WORPLESDON. I believed that you helped him to. Yes.

PAULINE (*marvelling*). There ! You're right again ! This is awful ! Helped him to—yes ! ! But here you are finding out all my little tricks without any help at all. I shall have to go.

WORPLESDON. Go ? Why ?

PAULINE. You'll be finding out all my past life. (*Confessing pathetically*) Oh, I've got a bit of a past, you know.

WORPLESDON. Nothing very terrible, I'm sure.

PAULINE. I don't know. (*Pathetically*) My husband filled up his share of my life with—experience. And I suppose experience and a past mean the same thing ?

WORPLESDON. Your husband is dead now, though.

PAULINE (*suddenly shrewd*). Did you think he wasn't ?

WORPLESDON (*taken aback, but after a second rather coldly*). I confess I wondered.

PAULINE. You wouldn't have if you'd seen the way he used to mix his drinks.

(*The unexpected vulgarity startles a laugh out of LORD WORPLESDON.*)

PAULINE (*looking at him in childlike wonder*). Now you're laughing. It's wonderful how a silly vulgarism tickles a clever man like you ! (*With another sudden change of tone : this time to the serious, hurt, and regretful*) I'm sorry you should have wondered, though. Algvy must have told you that I was a widow.

WORPLESDON. Yes—but widows . . .

PAULINE (*injured innocence at its loftiest*). A widow is a woman whose husband is dead, Lord Worplesdon. My husband is dead. I may be an adventuress, but I am not a liar.

WORPLESDON. I beg your pardon.

PAULINE. Thank you. You don't really see through me at all—only my tricks. But that is no reason for thinking me so—so wicked. Perhaps if I were a worse woman you would not be able to see through them quite so easily.

WORPLESDON (*beaten*). I have said I was sorry. You really are very sensitive.

PAULINE. Yes, I *am* sensitive. I suppose being alone in the world, and poor, and *proud*, makes me so. (*Looking up at him*

almost tearfully) Oh, do sit down; you make me feel so wicked standing over me like that. *(She quite unconsciously moves along the stair to make room for him to sit beside her, which he does—also unconsciously.)*

WORPLESDON. I've really no desire to make you feel wicked.

PAULINE *(gratefully)*. Thank you. No, of course you haven't. It's my own conscience that makes me feel so. *(With a sudden outburst of shame and misery pathetic to witness)* Oh, you were right! You were quite right, Lord Worplesdon. I am an adventuress. You were right to tell me so.

WORPLESDON. My dear—I didn't . . .

PAULINE. Oh, I'm not asking you to withdraw it.

WORPLESDON. I'm not trying to withdraw . . .

PAULINE. No. Why should you? You were right. I felt it when you said it.

WORPLESDON. My dear, I said it at your instigation.

PAULINE. Please don't try to soften it. I'm not blaming you for thinking so of me. I say you were right. I am an adventuress. A shameless adventuress.

WORPLESDON. No, no, no. At least, not a shameless one. *(With an attempt at facetiousness)* Indeed, I doubt if you'll ever be a successful one with that tender conscience of yours. There, there, don't cry. *(Produces a handkerchief from his pocket.)* You started the game of plain speech, you know. *(Proffering hanky)* Come, wipe your eyes.

PAULINE *(turning her tearful eyes upon him)*. I'm not crying.

WORPLESDON. Oh, aren't you? What do you call these, then? *(He dabs at her cheeks unprofessionally with the hanky.)*

(LADY O'HOYLE comes into sight through the curtained opening on the gallery and starts to descend the stairs. She is a dark-eyed, hooked-nosed old lady, still vigorous in a crabbed, jerky way. She wears black with the dowdiness of a true aristocrat of reputation and age beyond question. The backs of the two on the stairs are towards her. She pauses a few steps above them and looks down upon them. LORD WORPLESDON is still dabbing the lady's eyes, his old experience of the art returning to him with practice.)

LADY O'HOYLE *(icily)*. May I pass, Frederick?

(They both start out of her way, WORPLESDON getting down L.C., MRS. CHEVERELLE up R.C., and LADY O'H. standing between them. MRS. C. is quite unnecessarily flustered.)

WORPLESDON *(laughing at the situation)*. Mary, this is Mrs. Cheverelle. Mrs. Cheverelle—Lady O'Hoyle.

PAULINE *(in pitiable confusion)*. Oh, how awful you should have caught us *(checking herself with a glance at WORPLESDON)*—I mean, you should have caught me—looking like this. *(Dabbing at her eyes with LORD W.'s hanky)* I never cry,

really. (*Starting guiltily*) Oh, I've got your handkerchief, Lord Worplesdon! How awful! (*Passes it to him guiltily across her ladyship.*) Please (*LADY O'H. looks at her*)—oh, please don't look at me like that, Mrs.—I mean Lady—oh, you make me all curl up. I think I'd better run and bathe my eyes. (*She runs upstairs and off along gallery.*)

LADY O'H. (*calmly turning to WORPLESDON after watching the specimen off*). What's the matter with her?

WORPLESDON (*nonplussed*). I really don't know. I thought . . . (*wiping his forehead*). She's terribly sensitive.

LADY O'H. (*firmly: she is a woman of quick decisions*). She is a country bumpkin! She blushes when you look at her. Well (*sitting on settee*), that's better than what I expected to find. We shall be able to manage *her* all right.

WORPLESDON. Think so?

LADY O'H. Don't you?

WORPLESDON. No, I don't. She may be rather over-sensitive, but she's quite a woman of the world.

LADY O'H. Rubbish. A woman of the world would have tried to brazen it out.

WORPLESDON. Brazen what out?

LADY O'H. Why, that you had been trying to flirt with her.

WORPLESDON. My dear Mary . . .

LADY O'H. Frederick, please don't compel me to call you a liar. I shall most certainly do so if you attempt to deny that you were flirting with that child.

WORPLESDON (*resignedly*). Oh, very well.

(*ALGERNON returns up L. with a troubled face.*)

ALGERNON. I say, Dad . . . (*Seeing LADY O'H.*) Hullo, Aunt Mary! I didn't see you. (*Kisses her dutifully.*) Come to give us your blessing? You haven't lost much time.

WORPLESDON. What were you going to say, Algernon?

ALGERNON. Oh—Melch—I can't make him out. He wants me to give a message to the Duke. I told him the Duke wasn't here, and he said he soon would be.

LADY O'H. Quite right; so he will. I sent him a wire telling him to come at once.

ALGERNON. Oh, I say, Aunt Mary. It's not fair turning the whole family on to her like this.

LADY O'H. I thought it would take the whole family to cope with her. I was wrong.

ALGERNON. "Cope with her?"

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). Your aunt admits she was wrong.

LADY O'H. I do. She is frightened out of her wits by just one of us.

ALGERNON (*looking round*). Where is she?

WORPLESDON. She went upstairs to bathe her eyes.

ALGERNON. Bathe her eyes? I say—has she been crying?

LADY O'H. (*briefly*). Howling.

ALGERNON (*greatly distressed*). Oh, I say, why?

WORPLESDON (*seeking exculpation*). You know when I told her she was an adventuress . . .

ALGERNON (*aghast*). Dad! . . .

LADY O'H. Frederick, have you been . . . ?

WORPLESDON. Don't look like that, my boy. You were there at the time.

ALGERNON (*remembering*). Oh, then. (*Shaking his head*.) Yes, I saw that she was hurt, though she tried not to show it. You should be more careful, Dad.

(WORPLESDON is at a loss for a reply. While he is gasping for one, LADY O'H. addresses him severely.)

LADY O'H. Frederick, what have you been doing?

WORPLESDON. I . . .

LADY O'H. (*waving him aside*). I told you not to do anything without me. (*Explosively*) Good heavens! What a bull-at-a-gate way to go to work! Even if she were an adventuress, what good would it do to tell her so? It would merely put her on her guard. . . . As it is, you've hurt the feelings of a harmless little fool. And fools are only manageable when they're not upset.

(PAULINE—April smiles—appears on gallery.)

PAULINE (*with subdued cheerfulness*). Here I am. Please forgive me for running away.

(She comes down the stairs. ALGERNON meets her at stair-foot and kisses her hand affectionately. LADY O'H. on the settee points this out to LORD WORPLESDON standing near her.)

LADY O'H. There you are! And you can't blame the boy. If he's got a scrap of decent feeling he's bound to stand by her after your atrocious behaviour.

WORPLESDON (*hopelessly*). Mrs. Cheverelle, I appeal to you. Didn't you absolutely ask me to call you an adventuress?

PAULINE (*surprised at the question*). Oh no!

WORPLESDON (*pleadingly*). No—perhaps not quite. . . . I mean; didn't you . . . My dear boy, you were there at the time. . . . Didn't you ask me what I called a woman who . . .

PAULINE (*helping him along*). Who did what I have done—yes?

WORPLESDON (*turning to the others*). Well—well—and I told her . . .

LADY O'H. (*icily*). You called the child an adventuress to her face, we quite understand.

WORPLESDON (*almost tearfully*). She put the words into my mouth.
 (*A last appeal*) Mrs. Cheverelle, didn't you actually ask me if I didn't call you an adventuress?

PAULINE. Yes.

WORPLESDON (*relieved*). There!

PAULINE. But I hoped you'd say "no." I—expected you to say "no."

WORPLESDON (*losing courage*). I thought you were joking.

PAULINE. I was joking. I never expected you to take me so brutally seriously.

WORPLESDON (*beaten again*). My dear Mrs. Cheverelle, if I have hurt you, I beg your pardon most profoundly. We were at cross purposes. How was I to know you were so acutely sensitive to what I might think of you?

PAULINE (*seriously*). Of course I care what you think of me—if I'm going to marry Algy.

(WORPLESDON *swallows hard, but makes no attempt to reply.*)

PAULINE. My position is invidious enough as it is . . .

LADY O'H. (*interrupting with great firmness*). Your position is not invidious at all, my child. Don't talk any more nonsense. You are here for us to make your acquaintance, that is all. The question of your engagement to Algernon does not even arise till we know you. It is all nonsense thinking yourself an adventuress. Rich men marry poor girls sometimes, don't they?

PAULINE (*gratefully*). Oh, thank you. I thought you'd all think me so *designing*.

LADY O'H. We did. We don't now. Does that satisfy?

PAULINE (*with a deep breath of gratitude*). Yes.

(PAULINE *turns to ALGERNON and the two wander out onto the porch, watched by LADY O'H.*)

LADY O'H. (*turning contemptuously to LORD WORPLESDON*). Silly little fool! Where on earth did Algernon pick her up?

WORPLESDON. Paignton. I wish to goodness he'd left her on the beach.

LADY O'H. Frederick!

WORPLESDON (*savagely*). Or rather she'd left him in his boat.

LADY O'H. You seem still to have the ridiculous idea that the girl is a sort of siren.

WORPLESDON. You put it into my head.

LADY O'H. (*admitting it*). Before I had seen her. I never dreamed that Algernon could take the initiative in making a fool of himself. (*Rising in a business-like way*) Now where is she?

WORPLESDON (*looking round and out of the door*). On the drive—weeping at Algernon, I expect.

LADY O'H. Don't be so ill-natured, Frederick. We can prevent this match without behaving like brutes, I hope.

WORPLESDON. Oh, you still mean to prevent the match?

LADY O'H. Certainly I do.

WORPLESDON. How?

LADY O'H. I naturally prepared my plans for the adventuress you were so certain she would turn out to be.

WORPLESDON. Oh!

LADY O'H. But they're useless against that child.

WORPLESDON. Too harsh?

LADY O'H. (*ignoring the sarcasm*). I don't think we shall have much difficulty. By the look of the girl she'll cry off herself before the week's out. She's frightened to death already. (*Nodding*) We must *overawe* her.

WORPLESDON. My dear Mary. She isn't a milkmaid.

LADY O'H. Fiddlesticks. She comes from Croydon, or Brixton, or some such outlandish place.

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). Her clothes suggest it, don't they?

LADY O'H. (*overriding all argument*). What do you know about clothes? They're from a dress agency. I saw that at once. (*Resuming.*) Croydon or Brixton, or the Garden Suburb. And she'll be glad to get back there, too. (*Nodding to herself*) Overawe her; that's the trick. Overawe her quite nicely and kindly. (*Goes out through front door.*)

(LORD WORPLESDON *listens to the conversation on the porch.*)

LADY O'H. (*speaking off with lofty kindness*). Have you shown Mrs. Cheverelle the rhododendrons yet, Algernon?

ALGERNON (*off*). She's scarcely been here an hour, you know, Aunt Mary.

LADY O'H. (*as before*). You must certainly see them, Mrs. Cheverelle. They are quite a feature of Eftswood. Come along. I will show them to you. Algernon, go and talk to your father.

ALGERNON (*off*). Righto. Good-bye, dear.

PAULINE (*off*). Good-bye.

(ALGERNON *returns into room and sees his father upon the settee. He hesitates a moment before speaking.*)

ALGERNON. I say, Pater, I'm afraid you don't understand women.

WORPLESDON (*snorting*). I'm afraid I don't. Do you?

ALGERNON (*modestly*). I understand Peter a little. You mustn't think when she runs herself down that she means *you* to. She's very sensitive.

WORPLESDON (*rising violently*). Gracious heavens! . . .

ALGERNON (*placably*). I'm not blaming you, Dad. You didn't understand, that's all. I—I made her cry—once or twice—before I saw that what she really wanted was to be contradicted—reassured that I loved her and—all that sort of thing.

WORPLESDON. Did you always succeed in doing so?

ALGERNON. Oh yes—after a bit.

WORPLESDON (*appreciatively*). H'm. You'll have a pleasant time of it if she keeps it up after you're married.

ALGERNON (*meditatively*). Yes . . .

WORPLESDON (*smiling*). Had you thought of that ?

ALGERNON (*still more meditatively*). Ye—es.

WORPLESDON (*turning on him, eyebrows up*). Hullo !

ALGERNON (*guiltily answering the look*). What do you mean ?

WORPLESDON. You sound rather . . .

ALGERNON (*hotly*). Don't talk nonsense, Dad ; I'm awfully fond of her. (*Candidly ; disarming suspicion*) Of course I know that she'll be a bit difficult to get on with. She's older than me, and all that. And it'd be easier if she were in our set, too. But I'd be a howling cad to go back on her just because she's not. It'd break her heart. She trusts me so implicitly. (*Sorrowfully regarding his father*) I'm sorry *you* should have upset her, Dad.

WORPLESDON (*pathetically*). My dear boy, I never meant to. I—I—I'm out of practice.

ALGERNON (*mollified*). Yes, I know, Dad ; it's all right. (*Cheerfully*) As a matter of fact, your little—*faux pas*—introduced her to Aunt Mary in a decent light, and got the old lady on to her side, so it doesn't matter.

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). I'm glad.

(*The hum of an approaching motor is heard, emphasised by a series of toots. ALGERNON goes up and looks out at door. The motor is drawing nearer at an enormous pace.*)

ALGERNON (*at door*). Hullo, it's the Rolls-Royce.

WORPLESDON. They're in good time for dinner.

ALGERNON. Broke a record, I bet : Bently's driving.

(*The motor thuds up and stops outside. TENBY and another footman come through from servants' quarters L.C. The DUKE OF KEELS, a well-built, determined little man of forty-eight, with a very fine specimen of the family nose, enters in coat and cap from motoring. ALGERNON, being at door, shakes hands first.*)

ALGERNON. How are you, sir ?

KEELS (*allowing TENBY to help him off with his coat*). Pretty well.

(*Free from coat he crosses to WORPLESDON.*) Ah, Fred. Mary wired that you would want us.

WORPLESDON (*looking across at ALGERNON with a smile*). Bently is with you ?

KEELS. Of course. He drove us down in (*consulting watch*)—I dunno—something appalling, I suppose.

(*The footman goes out at front door and returns immediately with two portmanteaux. He follows TENBY—who carries the DUKE'S coat and cap—up the stairs and off along gallery.*)

WORPLESDON. You are staying over the week-end.

KEELS (*impressively*). We shall stay as long as is necessary.

(ALGERNON *exits angrily by door, leaving the DUKE alone with his cousin.*)

KEELS (*looking round to ensure privacy*). My dear Fred, this is a very serious affair. She has arrived?

WORPLESDON (*nodding*). Yes.

KEELS (*trying to recall the name*). Mrs.—Mrs. . . .

WORPLESDON. Cheverelle.

KEELS (*rolling the word on his tongue*). Cheverelle. H'm. Cheverelle. Doesn't sound quite the thing. I've never heard it before, though. Not notorious. That at least we may be thankful for. Is she to be bought off or . . .

WORPLESDON. Shsh.

(ALGERNON *returns through door with BENTLY: a tall, clean-shaven man of thirty, wearing a deep frown, a brown lounge suit, and a tweed overcoat. He carries a tweed cap in his hand.*)

ALGERNON (*talking to Bently as they enter*). Well, then, why don't you go back to town and try to do it in less? I never saw anything like you maniacs. (*To the others*) Twenty-six miles, done in fifty minutes—through three towns, too—and he grouses because he's done it before.

WORPLESDON (*shaking Bently's hand*). "What man has done, man can do" isn't enough for you, eh?

BENTLY (*laughing*). I prefer "What man has done, man can beat."

KEELS. This record-breaking mania is a sad vice.

BENTLY (*taking off his coat*). The twentieth-century perversion of the sporting instinct, sir.

(TENBY, *just returned from upstairs, takes his coat from him and is about to exit up L.C. when ALGERNON stops him.*)

ALGERNON. Wait a moment.

(TENBY *stops.*)

ALGERNON (*to the DUKE*). Whisky and soda?

KEELS. Ah! Yes.

ALGERNON. Bently?

BENTLY (*going to door and looking out*). No, thanks.

ALGERNON. I forgot. Have a glass of milk, or some nuts, or something?

BENTLY (*laughing*). Neither, thanks.

ALGERNON. Whisky and soda, Tenby.

(TENBY *exits.*)

BENTLY. I'll garage the car myself, I think, sir, if you don't want me.

KEELS. Go ahead.

(BENTLY goes out at door. ALGERNON stands just outside door watching him at the car. The two elders resume their conversation.)

KEELS. Did you say she was here ?

WORPLESDON. Yes.

KEELS. Where ? . . .

WORPLESDON. Inspecting the rhododendrons with Mary.

KEELS (*inquiringly*). Oh ?

WORPLESDON. Yes, the old lady has a kindly little scheme on to frighten her off.

KEELS. How ?

WORPLESDON (*sarcastically as he sits by the DUKE*). Freeze her with our grandeur. Terrify her with our magnificence. Overawe her . . .

KEELS. You don't think it will work ?

WORPLESDON. I don't . . .

ALGERNON (*at the door*). Hullo !

(*The two in the hall turn as LADY O'H. and PAULINE enter. PAULINE hesitates, R.C. ; LADY O'H. crosses to the DUKE, who rises as does LORD WORPLESDON. ALGERNON is down R.*)

LADY O'H. (*as she crosses*). Ah, Horace, I saw the car and Henry. (*Exchanging a family kiss.*) Good boy.

WORPLESDON. Mrs. Cheverelle, let me introduce you to my cousin, the Duke of Keels.

PAULINE (*very timidly*). How do you do ?

KEELS. How do you do ? (*Holding out his hand, which she takes.*)

(*The DUKE, not knowing what else to do, studies PAULINE, who quails visibly under his glance. Suddenly becoming self-conscious, he drops her hand and turns to the nearest person—LORD WORPLESDON—saying :*)

KEELS. What—when—how about dinner ?

WORPLESDON (*amused*). What do you mean ?—How about it ?

KEELS. Er—dressing . . .

PAULINE (*in an arresting tone to ALGERNON*). Algy, I want to speak to you.

ALGERNON. All right. Come along . . .

PAULINE. No—I'd rather say it here : I . . .

(*Everyone is now looking at her.*)

ALGERNON. What ? . . .

PAULINE. I want you to let me break off our engagement.

ALGERNON. Good Lord ! Why ?

PAULINE (*gaining courage*). I—I am out of place here. I feel it every moment I am amongst your people. I feel—overawed.

(WORPLESDON *chuckles*. LADY O'H. *turns on him with a glare*.)

ALGERNON. Has anyone been saying anything to you?

PAULINE. Oh no; you've all been very nice to me. That's the awful part of it. The nicer you are the more overawed I feel. Your aunt has been *particularly* kind to me—and I know she did all she could to make me feel at home—but, really, she makes me feel worse than anyone else does! She was only trying to be nice to me. She asked me if I liked—O—donto—glossums, and I didn't know what she meant! It was awful! And then she told me that the lawn was laid out by your great—great—great-grandfather. . . . (*Turning to* LADY O'H.) It was three greats, wasn't it, Lady O'Hoyle?

(LADY O'H. *makes no reply*. PAULINE *continues*.)

It—overawed me. It reminded me that I haven't the faintest notion what my great-great-great-grandfather did. I see I'm just a common little thing in your eyes.

ALGERNON. Nonsense, Peter. Do I make you feel so?

PAULINE (*guardedly*). No, you don't, but . . .

ALGERNON (*in the tone one uses to a nervous child*). Peter, you're being very silly. I'm sorry if Aunt Mary has made you uncomfortable; but I didn't know what what's-their-names were until the Pater went in for them; and I haven't the ghost of an idea what my great-great-great-grandfather did besides laying out that beastly lawn; so you see, these things that "overawe" you are ridiculously unimportant.

PAULINE (*willing to be convinced*). Yes?

ALGERNON. Yes. Aren't they, Dad?

WORPLESDON (*unwillingly*). Quite, oh, quite.

ALGERNON (*to Pauline again*). Now you're not going to talk any more nonsense, are you?

PAULINE. No. (*With a burst of thankfulness*) Oh, how glad I am I told you at once instead of letting people worry me—as they might have done—unintentionally, of course—if I'd let them.

(LADY O'H. *rises and goes upstairs, ploddingly, and without a word*.)

WORPLESDON (*with a touch of malice*). Where are you going, Mary?

LADY O'H. I am going to dress for dinner. (*Goes off along gallery*.)

ALGERNON (*surprised*). Why, what's the time? (*Looks at watch*) Oh, time enough. (*To Pauline*) Perhaps you'd better dress, dear.

PAULINE (*obediently*). Very well. (*With a smile to the others she starts up the stairs*.)

ALGERNON. And : . .

(She stops and turns on stairs.)

ALGERNON. . . . promise me you won't talk any more nonsense about feeling overawed. Nobody wants to make you feel so.

PAULINE *(candidly)*. No, I'm sure they don't—now. *(Exits along gallery.)*

(TENBY enters with decanters, syphons, and glasses, which he puts on the chest above door and exits. ALGERNON busies himself with drinks.)

WORPLESDON *(still watching Pauline off)*. Little devil!

KEELS. Why, what do you mean?

ALGERNON *(bringing them each a drink)*. Here you are. I'm going out to study the sunset. *(Returns to the chest, takes a glass therefrom, and strolls out through open door. The light is waning and rosy.)*

WORPLESDON *(sitting again with a sigh)*. She is a little devil, my dear Horace. See how neatly she stopped Mary's game?

KEELS *(indignantly)*. Mary played her game very badly—if you call it a game, trying to frighten the child with her—her snobbishness.

WORPLESDON *(quietly)*. I don't fancy Mary played her game so badly as our young friend would have us believe.

KEELS. Nonsense, Fred. You're prejudiced against her. Your plan was ridiculous.

WORPLESDON. My plan?

KEELS. Well, Mary's plan. You concocted it between you. There's only one way to manage this.

WORPLESDON. Oh?

KEELS. Yes. Buy her off.

WORPLESDON. She'd be insulted at the suggestion.

KEELS *(magnificently)*. That'll cost a bit more, of course.

WORPLESDON *(with appreciation)*. My dear Horace, I wish I had your magnificent lack of intelligence. It'll get you on, you know.

KEELS *(uncomprehending)*. What do you mean?

WORPLESDON. Do you really believe that Mrs. Cheverelle is to be bought off?

KEELS. Certainly.

WORPLESDON *(interested in the other's mentality)*. You don't happen to perceive that by merely refusing to be bought off she can have about twenty times as much cash as even you can offer her, with a good position into the bargain.

(The DUKE snorts, unconvinced.)

WORPLESDON. Why, confound it all, Horace, do you mean to say you don't see that she can be Duchess of Keels and Marchioness of Worplesdon with all Keelshire and Eftswood and perhaps Mary's

place thrown in—just by marrying Algernon and waiting in comfort!

KEELS. Nonsense.

WORPLESDON (*nodding philosophically*). You don't see it! How stupendous! How omnipotent! I who do am powerless. But you—if you can say nonsense to such obvious facts—well, I shouldn't be surprised if you succeeded in buying her off in spite of them.

KEELS. I've no doubt I shall.

WORPLESDON. Good! No wonder your weight turns the scale of parties when Bently elects to pull you off the fence.

KEELS (*stolidly*). Are you trying to be rude?

WORPLESDON. I am. How did you guess?

KEELS. You dragged in Bently. They always drag in Bently when they want to be rude in the House. (*Good-humouredly*) It's all right, my dear Fred; I don't mind. It's always annoying to have one's plans miscarry.

WORPLESDON (*with a touch of irritation*). My plans have *not* miscarried, Horace; for the very simple reason that I have made no plans. I doubt whether I *shall* make any "plans."

KEELS. You want Algernon to marry beneath him?

WORPLESDON. There is a great difference between not wanting a thing and seeing one's way to prevent it.

KEELS. Algernon is your son. I suppose you have some authority with him.

WORPLESDON. I have a great deal of authority with him, but there are some things . . . I have authority with Mole, the gardener, yet Mole married his first cousin—I disapprove strongly of marriages between cousins. Mole is an avowed atheist. I share the usual prejudice against avowed atheists amongst the lower classes. Yet somehow I don't feel entitled to interfere with Mole in these matters.

KEELS. Algernon is your *son*.

WORPLESDON. Am I to be less tolerant to my son than to my gardener?

KEELS (*practically*). You can make things a lot more uncomfortable for him.

WORPLESDON. True, but the power to make people uncomfortable is not precisely authority.

KEELS. I'd like to know what else it is.

WORPLESDON (*grimly*). You never will. No, Horace—I don't want Algernon to marry beneath him, but—there *are* more deadly sins, you know.

KEELS. There are none more uncomfortable.

WORPLESDON (*musng*). And being my boy—whom I'm fond of—I suppose that should weigh with me a good deal—if you were right—but I'm not sure you are. Life's pretty uncomfortable

anyway—and I'm not sure but that I'd rather see him uncomfortable—mildly uncomfortable—than . . . (*Pauses.*)

KEELS. Than that?

WORPLESDON. I was thinking of Archie Vownes—mainly—and a dozen other boys of Algernon's age who have never married beneath them or done anything to give their families trouble—beyond the trouble of signing cheques. They have never looked too high for their loves or too low for their wives, and I suppose they are quite comfortable—yet—I should hate to see Algernon like them.

KEELS. You're very virtuous.

WORPLESDON. I'm afraid it's not so much virtue as Algernon's happiness. I don't know if these comfortable young men are happy, I rather fancy not—anyway, I am sure Algernon would not be on their lines. He must have something fine about him to want to marry beneath him, you know.

KEELS (*staring*). I don't see why.

WORPLESDON. Don't you? Well . . . It takes some pluck.

KEELS. All fools are plucky.

WORPLESDON. Don't say that to the Territorials on Thursday. And it's chivalrous—I suppose you'll say all fools are chivalrous? My fear has been all along that his chivalrousness may have got him into a trap—and kept him there.

KEELS. You mean that she may be after him for his money?

WORPLESDON (*nodding*). . . . And if I thought that . . .

KEELS. Well, my dear Fred, don't you think it? She's a widow, she's older than he is—she's a nobody from nowhere . . .

WORPLESDON (*oracularly*). Widows have loved again, marriages been happy despite disparity—and even nobodies from nowhere may have hearts.

KEELS. Yes, but, damn it, man—she's all three!

WORPLESDON (*laughing*). Oh, direful quantity—it almost convinces me. Three possibilities don't make one certainty, you know, Horace, yet . . . Come along, let's go and dress for dinner. I give you best, Horace; she certainly is all three—and it worries me. I wish I saw a way—in case . . .

KEELS. I've seen a way, I've already told you . . .

WORPLESDON. Yes, yes—but we can't all be Machiavellis—you need an equal to appreciate you.

(TENBY enters and takes gong-beater.)

Here's Tenby.

TENBY. Dressing-bell, m'lord.

WORPLESDON (*covering his ears*). Go ahead.

(TENBY beats gong—a loud one—DUKE also covers his ears till beating is done.)

KEELS (*uncovering*). What an infernal machine! (*Going upstairs.*)

WORPLESDON. It is a bit resonant, isn't it. You know your room?
KEELS. Yes. (*Exits.*)

(WORPLESDON turns to place his cigarette in ash-tray.

ALGERNON enters. TENBY exits.)

ALGERNON. Dressing's late. (*Crossing.*)

WORPLESDON (*looking at watch*). Yes.

ALGERNON (*pausing on stairs*). I say, Dad!

WORPLESDON. Yes.

ALGERNON. I've been thinking. Does it occur to you that possibly Aunt Mary may have been trying to frighten Peter into giving me up?

WORPLESDON (*dryly*). Good gracious, no! Has it occurred to you?

ALGERNON (*dubiously*). I don't know. From what Peter said—well, it sounded . . .

WORPLESDON. Yes—from what Peter said—it did.

ALGERNON. What a dirty trick!

(*He is going up the stairs as PAULINE re-enters on to gallery. She is in evening dress.*)

ALGERNON. Dressed already?

PAULINE. Yes; I made up my mind to be very quick, so that no one could say that I was putting on my complexion.

ALGERNON. Peter!

(*She passes him and starts to descend stairs. He goes off along gallery.*)

PAULINE (*stopping on the stairs as she sees Lord Worplesdon, and then coming and sitting beside him on the settee*). I was hoping to find you alone. (*Cheerfully*) I do hope you forgive me.

WORPLESDON (*regarding her nervously*). Forgive you?

PAULINE (*with a pleasant little laugh*). Yes; for having made you look so foolish over having called me an adventuress. (*Settling herself comfortably beside him on settee*) Of course you saw that I was only acting.

WORPLESDON. Did I?

PAULINE. Of course you did; you know you did.

WORPLESDON. At any rate, I didn't expect you to be admitting it ten minutes after.

PAULINE (*laughing frankly*). I'm sorry. It was such a chance to put myself in a good light with Lady O'Hoyle. I simply had to make a confederate of you.

WORPLESDON. A confederate! Are you a moral pressgang? I am *not* your confederate.

PAULINE. Confess—you were very glad to see Lady O'Hoyle tripped up so nicely.

WORPLESDON. I didn't help you . . .

PAULINE. Yes, you did. You held one end of the string. You'd be sorry to see me beaten now, wouldn't you? You're quite hoping that I'll marry Algy in spite of everyone.

WORPLESDON. I do *not* hope that you'll marry Algernon. I am entirely opposed.

PAULINE. Don't you like me?

WORPLESDON. I like you very much.

PAULINE. I'm adaptable, you know. And I'm fairly clever.

WORPLESDON. Clever!

PAULINE. Don't you think I am?

WORPLESDON. You're an artist.

PAULINE. No, I'm not. (*Sadly*) I have a little art—but one needs luck to be an artist.

WORPLESDON. Luck?

PAULINE. And my art. . . . There are the applied arts, and the misapplied arts. My art, I think . . . don't you call it misapplied?

WORPLESDON (*nodding*). I'm afraid I do.

(BENTLY enters from R. through door.)

WORPLESDON. Hullo, Bently; let me introduce you . . . Mrs. Cheverelle, Mr. Bently.

PAULINE. How do you do. (*Charmingly*) I've been *dying* to meet you. I've heard such a lot about you from Algy.

BENTLY. You're very kind.

PAULINE (*playing her game*). You think I just said that to flatter you.

BENTLY. Oh no.

PAULINE. Yes, you do. I can see that you do. (*Dawning wonder*) And you're right, too! I *did* say it . . . just to flatter you. How wonderful that you should see through me like that. Can you always see through people?

BENTLY (*laughing and not a bit impressed*). Really, Mrs. Cheverelle, these commonplace courtesies can generally be seen through if one takes the trouble, can't they? Only they're scarcely worth it. (*Goes on upstairs and off.*)

PAULINE (*looking after him*). Superior beast.

WORPLESDON (*laughing at her*). Your misapplied art doesn't always work, does it? Perhaps this is your luck.

PAULINE. My luck?

WORPLESDON. You were saying that to be an artist one wanted luck. I took it that you meant opportunity. Here is your opportunity to try a subtler art . . .

PAULINE (*frankly*). I don't in the least know what you are talking about. (*Sitting on the stairs and patting the stair beside her*) Come and sit down and tell me why I mustn't marry Algy.

WORPLESDON (*dubiously*). I ought to be dressing for dinner.

(*He goes and sits beside her. The last rays of the setting sun fall upon them as the curtain descends.*)

END OF ACT I.

ACT II

SCENE

THE RHODODENDRONS. A PART OF THE PARK NEAR THE HOUSE

In the background, sky latticed by tall pine and beech trees ; the edge of a wood. Near is a great bough of high rhododendrons in full flower extending from R. to L. There are other large clumps R. and L., leaving entrance above them R. and L., and also below them—not gravelled paths, mere grassy ways that widen into a clearing which occupies the greater part of the centre of the stage.

A white garden settee stands L. in front of bough, a table is at its upper end, and a chair is lying on the grass L.C.

The curtain rises on an empty stage. LORD WORPLESDON and LADY O'H. are approaching from up L., their voices preceding them by a moment.

WORPLESDON (*off*). No, my dear Mary, no. I do not agree with you.

(They enter and slowly cross stage towards down R. exit.)

I have one objection to offer, and one only—she is *too old* for Algernon. She confessed to me last night that she was five years his senior. Five years ! and the discrepancy is on the wrong side. On the other side, twenty-five would not mean so much. I see no other objection to welcoming her as a member of our family. She is *charming, clever* . . .

LADY O'H. (*dryly*). But you consider her too old.

(They are now at the down R. exit, and just strolling off.)

WORPLESDON (*as they exit*). Too old for Algernon—too old for Algernon. The boy's . . . (*His voice dies away.*)

(ALGERNON *wiggles out of concealment amongst the bushes up C. He comes down and stares after his father with puzzled expression. Something attracts his attention to the upper R. entrance, where, after a second, BENTLY enters, walking fast. He pulls up on seeing ALGERNON.*)

ALGERNON (*disappointed*). Hullo !

BENTLY. Good morning. Waiting for Mrs. Cheverelle ?

ALGERNON (*grudgingly*). Ye—es. (*Looks at watch.*) Oh, I say !

BENTLY. Which stage have you reached ? The fear that something has happened to her ; that she's muddled the appointment and is waiting at the wrong place ; that she's forgotten altogether

—or the conviction that she remembers perfectly, but can't be bothered with you?

ALGERNON. She can't be looking for me anywhere. I've been all over the shop.

BENTLY. Any help to know that she left the house just ahead of me?

ALGERNON (*jumping up*). No! Did you pass her?

BENTLY. I didn't. I expected to catch her up about here.

ALGERNON (*impetuously*). I'll go and meet her. (*Crosses rapidly towards up R. exit.*)

BENTLY. Since I didn't overtake her you'll . . .

(*But ALGERNON is off. BENTLY, after looking after him in amusement for a moment, goes to seat, where he sits, taking out a notebook and turning its pages quietly and attentively.*)

(*PAULINE strolls on from up L. She stops, surprised to see BENTLY, who rises.*)

PAULINE. Oh, how you startled me!

BENTLY. Lord Gossamore has gone towards the house to meet you.

PAULINE. There, now! And I've been looking for him everywhere for the last half-hour! Why did he go towards the house?

BENTLY. I told him I had just seen you leave it.

PAULINE (*quite amiably*). Well, you *are* a pig!

BENTLY. May I speak to you for a moment?

PAULINE (*surprised and curious*). Ye—es.

BENTLY. As you know, I act for His Grace. I would be glad to know how much you would be willing to accept to release Lord Gossamore.

PAULINE. How much I . . .

BENTLY. It may save time if I tell you I am empowered to offer you five thousand pounds.

PAULINE (*theatrically*). Do you know that you are insulting me?

BENTLY (*amiably dismissing the suggestion*). Oh no.

PAULINE. But I say you are! You are suggesting that I only want to marry Algy for his money.

BENTLY. The exact suggestion expressed in my offer is that your love for him is so deep that it is worth no less than five thousand pounds.

PAULINE (*resenting the irony*). The *exact* suggestion is that an immediate income of thousands a year, with a title, and *immense* prospects, is worth no *more* than five thousand pounds.

(*BENTLY smiles the smile of a beaten man who expected defeat. She studies him curiously.*)

PAULINE. You're a clever man. Why did you make me such a silly offer?

BENTLY. Obviously in the hope that you'd accept it.

PAULINE. You never expected me to.

BENTLY. Well—no. But you'd be surprised how often these things come off.

PAULINE (*indignantly*). Would I, indeed? I think you might have *known* it wouldn't come off with me.

BENTLY. I have said I feared it wouldn't.

PAULINE. Thank you.

BENTLY. I don't think that you need thank me for crediting you with a rough knowledge of bargaining. A—wiser—woman might accept my offer.

PAULINE (*incredulously*). Accept? Five thousand for *my* chances?

BENTLY. Five thousand and freedom. Some women would prefer it to a loveless marriage.

PAULINE. Would they? Then they've had no experience of a pure love-match.

BENTLY (*surprised a little*). And you have?

PAULINE. Yes. So you needn't waste any more time sentimentalising.

BENTLY. My time is my employer's.

PAULINE (*scornfully*). Yes; and you do his bidding just like a machine.

BENTLY. It's very helpful to work under orders—like a machine—sometimes.

PAULINE. Even when you're sent to make ridiculous suggestions and drive impossible bargains?

BENTLY. Even then. Impossible bargains never occur to reasoning men—like myself. We overrate the shopkeepers' intelligence.

PAULINE. I see. The Duke doesn't make that mistake.

BENTLY. Nothing can induce him to. I used to try to point out to him that no one in their senses would accept his one-sided offers. His reply was invariably: "Nonsense! Go and talk 'em over."

PAULINE (*laughing*). A pleasant job for you.

BENTLY. Yes. But—you'd be surprised—I've pulled it off quite frequently. Not every time, of course. But—when you're offering ha'pence for half-crowns, if it comes off once in a dozen tries you're the gainer.

PAULINE. Does the Duke appreciate that?

BENTLY. Certainly not.

PAULINE. He can't expect you to succeed every time. It's unreasonable.

BENTLY. Of course, it's unreasonable. That's what he's there for. He supplies the unreasonable Will. I supply the reasoning Brain. Client and Counsel. Did you ever notice the look of surprise on a clever barrister's face when he gets the judgment he's been asking for?

PAULINE. No.

BENTLY. I have. And the cleverer he is, the more surprised he looks; especially when his client thanks him. Of course, he

ought to be thanking the client for making him go on with what he thought was a hopeless case. There is no knowing what a great brain can accomplish when it is driven by a determined, unreasoning Will.

PAULINE (*thoughtfully*). I suppose that's why clever men get on better when they get married.

BENTLY (*amused*). You're not suggesting that women are . . .

PAULINE. No. no. But marriage means Responsibility. And Responsibility is rather like a great, unreasoning Will, isn't it?

BENTLY. Yes.

PAULINE. Why don't you get married?

BENTLY. Are people usually anxious to take up responsibilities?

PAULINE. Are people usually anxious to work under other people for their ends?

BENTLY. No. Still, one can leave the other people.

PAULINE (*triumphantly*). That's another argument for marriage. It can't be left. What's the use of your great unreasoning will if it can be shaken off when it gets too unreasonable?

BENTLY. You're a great advocate for marriage?

PAULINE (*surprised*). Am I? I've no reason to be.

(*They are quiet for a moment; both thinking simultaneously, they open their mouths to resume.*)

PAULINE. After all . . .

BENTLY. Still . . .

(WORPLESDON and LADY O'H., returning from down R., come upon them.)

WORPLESDON. Good morning.

PAULINE. Good morning. (*Then very deferentially to LADY O'H.*) Good morning.

LADY O'H. (*going to settee and sitting*). Good morning.

WORPLESDON. We were sorry not to see you at breakfast.

PAULINE. You'd have been sorrier if you had seen me. I really can't be my own charming self at breakfast. I generally have a headache and wake up cussing.

BENTLY (*who has been floating a feather from his hand to the ground*). It's wonderfully still.

WORPLESDON. Suit you, eh?

BENTLY. That's what I was thinking.

LADY O'H. Huh! I'm glad that machine is smashed up.

BENTLY. She'll be aloft again next week.

PAULINE (*grasping the subject of the conversation suddenly and in very genuine excitement*). Oh! Do you fly?

BENTLY. I do.

PAULINE. Why didn't you tell me?

BENTLY. Really, you can't expect me to make the announcement to everyone I meet.

PAULINE. It must be lovely. I *do* admire you so.

BENTLY (*coldly, mistaking her enthusiasm for gush*). Thank you.

PAULINE. I mean all of you—airmen. The feeling—and the danger—don't you just love it?

BENTLY. We love the danger so much that we risk our lives daily trying to decrease it.

WORPLESDON. And when the game's as safe as croquet, you'll drop it.

LADY O'H. You'll kill yourself in that machine yet.

BENTLY (*the usual defence*). My dear Lady O'Hoyle, believe me, it's the safest pastime on earth . . .

LADY O'H. On earth, yes—but you don't stop there.

BENTLY (*laughing*). We always come back to it.

LADY O'H. What earthly need is there for men to go flying about in the air?

BENTLY. Man has satisfied his needs and is now taking his opportunities.

WORPLESDON (*with a look at PAULINE*). Progressing from Nature to Art.

LADY O'H. What's art got to do with it?

WORPLESDON. Mrs. Cheverelle has a theory that art's mainspring is opportunity.

PAULINE. Have I? I didn't know I had.

BENTLY. Don't disclaim it; it's a good theory.

LADY O'H. How about that second post?

WORPLESDON (*looking at his watch*). Must be in by now. (*To the others*) Coming to the house?

BENTLY. I am. Mrs. Cheverelle is waiting for Lord Gossamore.

WORPLESDON. Men are really the unpunctual sex, aren't they, Mrs. Cheverelle?

PAULINE. Oh, I don't mind. Good-bye. (*She sits resignedly.*)

BENTLY. I suppose the Duke's not gone out yet?

WORPLESDON. I believe he's thinking in the drawing-room. I heard the piano.

BENTLY. I shall give him something more to think about (*with a glance back at PAULINE*).

(WORPLESDON, LADY O'H., and BENTLY *exeunt up R., leaving PAULINE on seat. Immediately ALGERNON'S voice is heard, greeting them, out of breath.*)

ALGERNON (*off*). Hullo . . .

WORPLESDON (*off, with a touch of reproof in his voice*). Mrs. Cheverelle is waiting for you, Algernon.

(ALGERNON *runs on up R.*)

PAULINE (*rising*). You needn't have hurried, Algy—I don't mind waiting.

ALGERNON. I like that, when I've been looking for you everywhere. I was here ages ago.

PAULINE (*brightly*). Am I very late ?

ALGERNON (*gloomily*). Half an hour.

PAULINE (*shocked*). Algy !

ALGERNON. What's wrong ?

PAULINE. You should never tell a lady that she is half an hour late.

ALGERNON. I didn't think that you wanted a lie.

PAULINE (*admonishing him*). You could have said : " I'm here first." That wouldn't have been a lie.

ALGERNON (*snorting*). No.

PAULINE. And it would have sounded ever so much nicer than (*mimicking him*) " half an hour."

ALGERNON (*amused but resisting*). Oh, rats ! I say, Peter—you know—I'm getting fed up with this. We've scarcely had a moment together since you arrived. You're always monopolised by the Duke or the Governor.

PAULINE (*gently*). Well, I came here to make your people's acquaintance.

ALGERNON. You're confoundedly thorough.

PAULINE (*taking his arm and walking him towards L.*). Don't be fretful, Algy. I'm doing it for you.

ALGERNON. That's all jolly fine, but I do wish you'd give me a bit more of your society. I'm fed up with old Bently. I'm always being left behind with him.

PAULINE. I'm sorry. And you don't like Bently ? (*She sits against table facing him.*)

ALGERNON. No, I don't. Do you ?

PAULINE (*emphatically*). No.

ALGERNON. He talks about nothing but Mendelism, and what-d'you-may-call-ums—eugenics, and motors, and aeroplanes . . .

PAULINE (*grudgingly*). Yes, he's very clever.

ALGERNON (*surprised*). Clever ? Try and get him on to form, and he's bored to death. He's only a specialist.

PAULINE (*dubiously*). What's form ?

ALGERNON. Racing form. Horses . . .

PAULINE. Oh, of course. (*More brightly*) He doesn't approve of *me*.

ALGERNON. Oh, he's got some idiotic idea that our marriage will injure the Duke's prestige. He's mad on the Duke.

PAULINE. Don't you think it's rather a pity so clever a man should waste his time getting another man on ?

ALGERNON. Oh, he's nothing wonderful, really. He happens to be what the Duke needs, that's all.

PAULINE. Still, if he worked for himself . . .

ALGERNON. He'd never do anything.

PAULINE (*angrily*). I bet he would.

ALGERNON. Well, don't put the idea into his head, or the Duke's done for. He'd be getting off the fence on the unpopular side and losing his reputation as an impartial man.

PAULINE. I wasn't thinking of putting the idea into his head.
If a man's fool enough to waste his life working for another man, he deserves . . .

ALGERNON (*impatiently*). Oh, let's drop him. You're getting on all right with the Pater, any way, aren't you?

PAULINE (*with a smile*). Oh yes—I think your father likes me.

ALGERNON. Rather. You told him your age after all.

PAULINE. Did I? Oh yes, I remember—last night after dinner. I had to be frank with him, he was so nice to me.

ALGERNON. Yes, I noticed he was . . . I rather wish you hadn't told him your age, though.

PAULINE. Why?

ALGERNON. Of course, it's nothing to me that you're a couple of years older than me, but the Dad seems prejudiced about it.

PAULINE. Oh?

ALGERNON. Yes. (*Regretfully*) It's a pity, because in every other respect he seems to be quite willing to give his consent. (*Reproachfully*) You might have knocked off a couple of years, Peter.

PAULINE. Yes. That never occurred to me!

ALGERNON. The Dad will have to get used to it, that's all. He likes you.

PAULINE (*cheerfully*). Oh yes . . .

ALGERNON (*shaking his head despondently*). He was rather harping on it, though.

PAULINE (*curiously*). When?

ALGERNON. Just now—to Aunt Mary. I dodged out of the way to let them pass. He was saying that he saw no earthly objection to you, except that you were too old for me.

PAULINE (*interested*). Really? (*Considering deeply*) Oh!

ALGERNON (*misinterpreting the "Oh"*). Yes. Pity you told him, isn't it?

PAULINE (*still considering*). What did he say—again?

ALGERNON (*quoting*). "No objection to welcoming her as a member of the family, except that she's too old for him"—that's me.

PAULINE. With the accent on the "*you*."—"Too old for *Alger-non*"—is that how he said it?

ALGERNON (*vaguely*). Ye—es.

PAULINE (*her eyebrows raised whimsically*). Dear me; and he's scarcely known me a day. Oh, this is so sudden!

ALGERNON (*not catching her words*). What?

PAULINE (*settling herself on the settee and addressing Algernon practically*). I shouldn't be surprised if we *do* have to break it off, Algy.

ALGERNON (*amazed*). Peter!

PAULINE. Oh, don't look like that, boy; you'd get over it; you know you would.

ALGERNON (*beseechingly*). Peter!!

PAULINE. You'd begin to realise within twenty-four hours that you were far happier without me.

ALGERNON. Peter—I do wish you wouldn't go on like this.

PAULINE (*realising it*). Yes—I've done it before, haven't I? (*More kindly*) Dear boy, don't you see that I have *had* to go on like this to prevent your finding out that you don't care two straws about me?—That I *must* keep you so busy reassuring me that you want to marry me that you haven't time to consider whether you really do or not?

ALGERNON. Why should I keep on reassuring you that I do if I don't?

PAULINE. Because I make you, poor boy. I play upon your chivalry and soft-heartedness, and that conceited belief in your own constancy that all nice boys have.

ALGERNON. You talk as if you might be my grandmother.

PAULINE (*smiling*). I don't know about *grand-mother*. (*Nodding herself back to practicality again.*) Yes; I think I must let you off.

ALGERNON. Let me off?

PAULINE (*nodding*). Let you off marrying me.

ALGERNON. How do you know that I want to be let off?

PAULINE. Don't you? (*Raising a finger and speaking very earnestly.*) Think—*selfishly*. Put all your dear, conceited fear of hurting me on one side. Try to believe that it won't hurt me a bit to give you up. I could actually say good-bye now without a tear. Do you hear that? It surprises you, doesn't it?

ALGERNON (*reproachfully*). Peter!

PAULINE. No, no, I'm not being nasty. It *does* surprise you, doesn't it?

ALGERNON. Well—yes.

PAULINE. Now, answer my question. Don't you want me to let you off?

ALGERNON (*wondering*). How did you know?

PAULINE (*catching him*). Aha!

ALGERNON (*slowly and still wondering*). I hardly knew it myself.

PAULINE. You mean, you never admitted it to yourself? (*He nods doubtfully.*) That's because you are a gentleman.

ALGERNON. Did I ever show it?

PAULINE. Never!

ALGERNON (*reassured, but still wondering vaguely*). Then how . . . PAULINE (*rising and coming to him*). Algy, I'll tell you something:

If every woman were to go to the man who had proposed to her one week after accepting him, and *convince* him that it would not break her heart to let him off—there'd be an awful decline in marriages.

ALGERNON. Oh, I say! You are beastly cynical.

PAULINE. Because I know that—in men—a certain vain pity for the poor girl often bridges the months between the fascination of the proposal and the love that comes later? No, I'm not cynical, Algy. I think it's very fine of you men to be willing to sacrifice your whole lives rather than hurt a poor little woman by admitting your mistake. And I'm so glad to know that the sacrifice isn't such a great one as you think.

ALGERNON. I never heard you talk like this before. You're saying the most awful things in the sweetest voice imaginable.

PAULINE. Ah! We've broken *our* bridge just in time. Come . . . (*she holds out her hand to him*)—shake hands and admit that you're glad to be free again.

ALGERNON. I can't.

PAULINE. For fear of hurting me?

ALGERNON. No.

PAULINE (*insisting*). Yes. It won't. It (*confessing*)—it will take a great weight off my mind, if you want to know.

ALGERNON (*hastily and candidly*). Oh, all right! I am glad—honestly, I am.

PAULINE (*laughing*). Nice obliging boy.

ALGERNON (*protesting*). No, I'm not saying it to oblige. I only hesitated . . .

PAULINE (*finishing for him*). Because you couldn't believe that I'd be pleased to hear it.

ALGERNON (*giving in and wiping his brow*). Phew! I say, you do flummox a chap. My brain feels as if it had been doing two hours' solid gym.

PAULINE (*smiling*). Poor boy.

ALGERNON (*on a fresh tack*). I say—may I ask you something?

PAULINE. Yes.

ALGERNON. Why did you suddenly want to let me off?

PAULINE (*after a moment's consideration*). Because of what you told me your father had said.

ALGERNON. About your being too old for me?

PAULINE (*nodding*). Yes—about my being too old—for you. (*She walks slowly towards lower L. exit, but stops and turns with an idea.*) Oh, Algy—you'll tell him, won't you?

ALGERNON. Yes.

(*She goes off down L. ALGERNON stands staring after her, still in some perplexity. The DUKE strolls on up R.*)

KEELS. Seen your father, Algernon?

ALGERNON (*jumping and turning*). Eh?

KEELS (*looking at him strangely*). Hullo! What's the matter?

ALGERNON (*hopefully*). Why? Do I look pale?

KEELS. No. You look warm. Been walking fast?

ALGERNON. No, I don't think so.

KEELS (*crossing to settee*). Warm weather, you know—must take care of yourself. Was that Mrs. Cheverelle who just . . .

ALGERNON. Yes (*hesitating over his news*)—I suppose the sooner . . . (*Taking the plunge*) We've broken off our engagement, sir.

KEELS. Eh? God bless my soul! This is a pleasant surprise. Sensible feller! Er—er (*warningly*)—but there never was any engagement to break off, you know, really.

ALGERNON (*a little ruefully*). There never will be now, sir.

KEELS. A little (*tapping heart*)—touched? I know, I know. We have to face an occasional twinge, you know. It's hard on us, but we mustn't shirk it. You've done a very sensible thing, my boy. I congratulate you. Ah—you haven't written her any letters, or anything that she can use, I hope?

ALGERNON. I don't understand you, sir.

KEELS (*explaining*). Breach of promise! Serious . . .

ALGERNON. She broke it off, sir; I didn't.

KEELS (*thoroughly surprised*). She did?

ALGERNON. Yes.

KEELS. Are you sure?

ALGERNON. Positive.

KEELS (*nonplussed*). Without a . . . By word of . . . (*Finding expression*) You haven't got it in writing?

ALGERNON (*amused*). You think she may go back on it?

KEELS. I don't know what to think. If she really has taken the initiative, we must hush it up.

ALGERNON. Why?

KEELS. Let the world know that you've been thrown over by an adventuress? No, no, no! Look as if we were insolvent! Why, it might cause a fall in Consols!

(WORPLESDON *returns down R. with* LADY O'HOYLE.)

KEELS (*as soon as he sees* WORPLESDON). Fred, have you heard this?

WORPLESDON. What? (*Stopping C., LADY O'H. on his R.*)

KEELS. That woman's saved us all our trouble.

WORPLESDON. What woman? What trouble?

KEELS. Mrs. Cheverelle; she's broken with Algernon.

WORPLESDON (*with a great start*). What! (*His step forward lands on LADY O'H.'s foot.*)

LADY O'H. (*with a grimace of intense pain*). Uph! Frederick! You needn't trample on my foot.

WORPLESDON (*hastily*). I'm sorry, Mary. (*To ALGERNON*) When?

LADY O'H. (*limping to settee and sitting beside the DUKE*). Let me sit down.

WORPLESDON (*still to ALGERNON in great excitement*). Did she break it off, or did you?

ALGERNON. She did, right enough.

LADY O'H. (*still groaning*). I've only got one corn, Frederick, but if you had aimed at it . . .

WORPLESDON (*impatiently*). I'm sorry, Mary. (*To ALGERNON*)
When?

ALGERNON. Not five minutes ago.

WORPLESDON. Did she give any reason?

ALGERNON. Yes; because you'd said she was too old for me.

WORPLESDON (*delightedly, jumping at it*). So she is, my boy—
much too old. Where is she?

KEELS. Steady, Fred, steady! We are all glad . . .

WORPLESDON (*starting off up L. in a great state of excitement*). Which
way did she go?

LADY O'H. You're not going after her, Frederick?

WORPLESDON (*checking himself*). No, of course not—why should
I?

LADY O'H (*acidly*). You seemed disposed to.

WORPLESDON. I only wanted to assure her that she was still a
welcome guest at Eftswood. (*More calmly, coming c., to*
ALGERNON) It's a blow to you, my boy, but you'll get over it.

ALGERNON (*uncomfortably*). Oh, I'm all right, Dad!

WORPLESDON. Yes, yes; of course, you see, she really was too old
for you. Five years your senior, you know.

ALGERNON. Two, Dad.

WORPLESDON. No, no—five.

ALGERNON. I'm twenty-four, Dad.

WORPLESDON. Yes, yes—and she's twenty-nine.

ALGERNON. Twenty-six, Dad.

WORPLESDON. No, no, no—twenty-nine. She told me so only last
night—twenty-nine.

ALGERNON. Well—I understood . . .

WORPLESDON. She wouldn't make herself out older than she was,
would she? Now, which way did she go?

ALGERNON (*lost in thought*). I dunno—towards the coverts.

WORPLESDON. Yes, yes. (*Exits hastily down L.*)

ALGERNON (*looking after him*). The Pater seems jolly excited over
Peter jilting me.

KEELS. We are all glad, Algernon, for your sake. In time you will
see how right we are, and be glad, too.

ALGERNON. Very likely.

(BENTLY enters hastily from up R. ALGERNON during the next
few lines strolls off up R. lighting a cigarette.)

BENTLY (*approaching the DUKE*). I thought I should find you here,
sir. Is there anything you wish to add to your letter to the
Prime Minister?

KEELS (*collecting himself and looking business-like*). Ah—um—
what have I said?

BENTLY. Nothing that would interest you, sir.

KEELS. Is there anything that I ought to add?

BENTLY. Nothing, sir.

KEELS. Yes . . . (*Oracularly*) Then don't add anything. I am pledged to no course?

BENTLY. No course whatever, sir.

KEELS. Ah—the letter reveals nothing of what I think on the subject?

BENTLY. Not a scintilla, sir.

KEELS (*suspiciously*). What's that?

BENTLY. A suggestion. Not a suggestion of what you think.

KEELS. Ha! Yes! (*After deep thought*) Better give him my very kind regards.

BENTLY. Do you think it wise, sir?

KEELS (*apprehensively*). Don't you?

BENTLY. Very kind regards. He might build on it, sir.

KEELS. Ha—true. What do you suggest?

BENTLY (*promptly*). Omit the very.

KEELS. Good! Good! Do so.

BENTLY. I'll see to it, sir. (*Turns to go.*)

KEELS. Oh—and—Bently . . . (*BENTLY stops and turns.*) We shan't have to bother any more about Lord Gossamore's little (*looking round to make sure that ALGERNON is out of earshot*)—entanglement. It's off. Mrs. Cheverelle has broken it off.

BENTLY. Not really? (*He returns c. in obvious surprise.*)

KEELS. Yes.

(*BENTLY stands c. in deep thought. The other two watch him from the settee.*)

LADY O'H. We are all nonplussed, Henry. Can you suggest any motive for her action?

KEELS (*rising*). Don't bother to try. She's saved us a round sum of money—and considerable unpleasantness.

BENTLY (*doubtfully*). Yes.

KEELS (*looking at him*). What do you mean?

LADY O'H. Henry has his doubts about the unpleasantness being safely past. Is that it?

BENTLY. I'm afraid I have.

KEELS. Nonsense! She's definitely broken with Algernon. Only by word of mouth, to be sure, but it's final.

BENTLY. Oh, I've no doubt it's final so far as Lord Gossamore is concerned.

LADY O'H. Henry, do you suspect . . .

BENTLY. I'm afraid I do—apprehend something, Lady O'Hoyle. Why should she break with Lord Gossamore when she's sure of him?

KEELS. Is there always a reason for what a woman does? (*Sits again to discuss it.*)

BENTLY. A motive—though not always a reasonable one. I shouldn't suspect Mrs. Cheverelle of an unreasonable motive, though. She left all those things behind her some years ago,

LADY O'H. You think she's designing, then ?

BENTLY. I think she has designs.

LADY O'H. Why, Henry, she's as transparent as a jelly-fish.

BENTLY. Do you know why a jelly-fish is transparent ? So's not to be *seen* too clearly.

KEELS (*with some pride*). I've seen a jelly-fish, distinctly.

BENTLY. Describe one.

KEELS. Well—er—it's a transparent creature. . . .

BENTLY. So is Mrs. Cheverelle. What do we know about her, except that she's a transparent creature ?

KEELS (*chuckling*). She's amusing—and good company—quite a nice little woman in her own way. . . .

BENTLY. I'm afraid I don't agree with you, sir.

KEELS (*amused and tolerant*). No, I know you don't. You dislike her because she wouldn't let you talk her over this morning. I believe you're afraid of clever women.

BENTLY (*good-humouredly*). Very likely.

LADY O'H. Sensible boy.

BENTLY. Anyway, I dislike a woman who uses her cleverness as Mrs. Cheverelle uses hers.

LADY O'H. I don't think she's clever, Henry—really, I don't. You are a most intelligent boy, and we usually agree, but I don't think she's clever.

BENTLY. To me it's a great proof of her astuteness that she's convinced you that she's not. But—if she's not clever—how did she become engaged to Lord Gossamore ?

LADY O'H. Just luck ; she happened to fascinate him.

BENTLY (*unconvinced*). Um. And why has she broken it off ?

KEELS. Just whim—a woman's whim.

BENTLY (*suddenly sentimental*). A woman's whim is the divinest of reasons. I don't credit Mrs. Cheverelle with so much womanliness. But, granting you are right, what do you think she will do now ?

KEELS. It's impossible to say.

BENTLY (*scoring*). Exactly ; it's impossible to say. Allowing that you are right, we aren't prepared for anything. Allowing that you are wrong, you're no better off. Well—let's assume that she *is* clever ; that she hooked Lord Gossamore skilfully for his money ; that she broke it off with a reason—what would that reason be ?

KEELS (*vaguely*). Hope of getting something out of us ?

BENTLY. Release the prisoner and then demand the ransom ? (*Shakes head.*) Lady O'Hoyle, what motive do you suggest ?

LADY O'H. (*with conviction*). She's fallen in love.

BENTLY. Good heavens ! We are assuming that she is actuated by reason.

LADY O'H. Love's stronger than reason.

BENTLY. Not in the case of a woman like Mrs. Cheverelle. There is only *one reasonable* motive.

KEELS. Well ?

BENTLY (*simply*). A better catch in the net.

KEELS (*startled*). Eh . . . who ?

BENTLY. The field is limited. Your Grace or Lord Worplesdon.

KEELS (*nervously*). Ha, ha !

LADY O'H. (*acutely*). You leave yourself out.

BENTLY (*with dignity*). I am trying to see with Mrs. Cheverelle's eyes, Lady O'Hoyle ; and consequently I am judging the eligibles by their *cash* values.

KEELS (*who has been thinking*). Then if you're right she's after Worplesdon.

BENTLY. If I am right she's sure of him.

KEELS (*regretfully*). T't, t't, t't, then it will mean buying her off after all.

LADY O'H. (*impatiently*). Oh, Horace, do you really suppose . . .

BENTLY (*who is facing the L. upper entrance*). Shsh !

(PAULINE enters up L. and stops on seeing the others.)

PAULINE. Oh—I was looking for Lord Worplesdon . . .

(*The others exchange swift glances, which she perceives.*)

What's the matter ? Have you been talking about me ?

(ALGERNON strolls on again up R.)

Algy, they're all looking at me as if they suspected me . . .

(LORD WORPLESDON enters up L., walking very fast.)

WORPLESDON (*as he enters*). You do walk fast—I . . . (*Pulls up awkwardly on seeing others.*)

PAULINE (*innocently*). Have you been running after me ?

WORPLESDON (*with an eye on the DUKE and LADY O'H.*). Ye—es. I—I want to say that I hoped—we all hoped—your having—released Algernon . . .

PAULINE. Oh, he's told you ?

WORPLESDON. Yes. I wanted to say that I hoped it wouldn't compel you to shorten your stay.

PAULINE. Oh, thank you. But I'm afraid I ought not to stay now ; ought I, Lady O'Hoyle ?

LADY O'H. (*brusquely*). I really don't know what you ought to do.

PAULINE. Oh—you're not angry with me for having broken it off, are you ? (*Looking round piteously.*) I'm so sorry ! I thought you'd all be so pleased.

KEELS. Mrs. Cheverelle, we should be pleased if we were sure of the motive. (*He looks to BENTLY for applause, but gets none.*)

PAULINE (*wonderingly*). The motive . . . I told Algy—Lord Gossamore : because I was too old for him.

KEELS (*acutely*). I said the motive—not the excuse.

(LADY O'H. and BENTLY make a nervous movement to silence the DUKE, but PAULINE is too quick for them.)

PAULINE (*very innocently*). Oh, you saw it was only an excuse! How clever of you! The motive . . . (*Bashfully*) I'm afraid I can't tell you the real motive—yet. (*Turning her back on the DUKE she addresses LORD WORPLESDON.*) I'm sorry you should have had to run after me. Why didn't you call out?

KEELS (*resuming the inquiry*). May I . . .

LADY O'H. (*sotto voce*). Be quiet!

PAULINE (*turning obediently*). Yes . . .

KEELS (*finely*). May I say that our gratitude to you for releasing Lord Gossamore would be more—heartfelt if you would tell us what the motive was.

BENTLY (*attempting unnoticed to signal silence to the DUKE*). Your Grace . . .

PAULINE (*bashfully*). Must I tell you?

KEELS (*waving BENTLY aside*). We should be glad if you would.

PAULINE (*humbly*). Very well. I broke it off because—because I (*she hesitates in pitiable confusion and looks unmistakably at LORD WORPLESDON*)—because I hoped (*almost breaking down under the ordeal*)—I thought—oh, how can I tell you?

WORPLESDON (*heroically and angrily*). Horace, you are behaving like a cad. Mrs. Cheverelle broke off her engagement to Algernon because—I had asked her to marry me.

ALGERNON (*cut to the heart*). Dad!

PAULINE. Oh! (*She gazes at LORD WORPLESDON in intense admiration of his nobleness.*)

KEELS (*rising*). Fred! Cut out your own son . . .

WORPLESDON (*hotly*). You none of you wished . . .

KEELS (*wildly*). We knew this was going to happen—Bently warned us. You were right, Bently—a designing woman . . .

(*At the mention of BENTLY'S name PAULINE turns and looks at that gentleman. He meets her eye, and holds it with a suggestion of amused scorn in his own glance that appears to fascinate the lady, for she keeps her eyes on his face unmovedly.*)

WORPLESDON (*furiously*). You knew—Bently warned you—then why need you have cross-examined Mrs. Cheverelle as you did? Don't say one word, Pauline . . . (*She has shown no desire to do so.*) Give me your arm. Come.

(*PAULINE, who has been looking steadily at BENTLY, obeys in a trance, and they go off together down R.*)

KEELS. Well, I'm . . . (*Sits again in impotent fury.*)

LADY O'H. Horace, be quiet. You can thank yourself for this, and nobody else.

KEELS (*amazed*). I—I . . . I am to blame ?

BENTLY (*gravely*). I am afraid Your Grace precipitated matters, though I venture to suggest the lady led you on. (*A smile breaking over his face.*) She really is very able.

KEELS (*with conviction*). She's the Devil! She made me play right into her hands.

BENTLY (*turning away to hide a smile and encountering Algernon, to whom he speaks with sudden kindness*). Well, at least, Gossamore, you can see that you are well rid of her now.

ALGERNON (*miserably*). Eh ? Yes—I suppose so.

BENTLY (*turning back to the DUKE*). Will Your Grace read through the Prime Minister's letter ? The post goes at one-thirty.

KEELS (*rising and crossing agitatedly*). I can't give it any thought now. I'm too agitated.

(*Turning back to BENTLY at R. upper entrance.*)

She'll have to be bought off, Bently! I look to you to arrange it somehow.

(*He exits.*)

LADY O'H. (*rising*). If you will give me your arm, Henry, I am going towards the house too.

(*She takes BENTLY'S arm—then to ALGERNON, who is up C. :*)

Are you coming too, Algernon ?

ALGERNON (*standing miserably on one foot*). I don't know what I'm going to do.

LADY O'H. (*kindly*). Don't let that woman worry you, dear. She's not worth it.

ALGERNON. I wasn't thinking of her—that's all right . . . (*Almost tearfully*) But—the Dad . . .

LADY O'H. (*turning to Bently*). She'll be marrying you next, Henry—she's clever enough.

BENTLY (*as they go off*). I don't think her cleverness enables her to see far beyond money values.

(*ALGERNON is left—a monument of wretchedness, C. PAULINE returns down R. as soon as the others are out of sight and goes to him.*)

PAULINE (*simply and sincerely*). Algy, I don't want you to feel—You know your father hadn't really asked me to marry him at all, don't you ?

ALGERNON (*unbelieving*). Then why did he say he had ?

PAULINE. Because he knew that I had broken with you to give him the chance to.

ALGERNON. So did everybody.

PAULINE. Everybody ?

ALGERNON. Yes ; couldn't you see they'd been discussing you ? Old Bently knew as soon as he heard that you'd broken with me what your game was.

PAULINE. Mr. Bently appreciates me.

ALGERNON. Appreciates you? I shouldn't care to be appreciated like that.

PAULINE. I didn't say that I cared to be appreciated like that either.

(WORPLESDON *enters down R.*)

WORPLESDON. Here he is. Algernon . . .

ALGERNON (*cutting him short*). Oh, it's all right, Dad. I know you couldn't help it—

(*Goes off miserably up L.*)

PAULINE (*turning ruefully to WORPLESDON*). Oh dear! And I thought I was so clever—hurrying you up. I wish I hadn't now.

WORPLESDON. Why?

PAULINE. That poor boy's heart-broken.

WORPLESDON. He didn't seem to be when he told us.

PAULINE. Oh, I don't mean about me jilting him, but about you cutting him out.

WORPLESDON (*with a touch of pride*). Jealous?

PAULINE. Jealous? No! Disappointed in you. You know how fond he is of you; he thinks you've played him a dirty trick. So you have.

WORPLESDON. No, I haven't. I waited till you'd broken—come to think of it, I haven't asked you yet whether you'll marry me.

PAULINE (*savagely*). Is there any need to ask me? Don't you know that I will? You're my opportunity, and I've got to jump at you. Everybody knows that. You gave them to understand that you'd asked me already, anyway. Oh yes (*in response to a move from him*) I know I made you—my wits ran away with me. I saw the opportunity and . . . (*breaking off angrily*). Oh!

(*Then sitting on settee and suddenly dropping her angry tone for one of amusement.*)

Oh dear, what a stormy petrel I am!

WORPLESDON (*sitting down beside her and speaking tenderly*). That's why I love you. You're the most delightfully transparent . . .

PAULINE (*snappishly*). Oh, don't talk nonsense.

WORPLESDON (*hurt*). Pauline!

PAULINE. And don't call me Pauline.

WORPLESDON. My dear—didn't you break off with Algy to let me . . .

PAULINE. Yes, you know I did. (*Brutally*) Aren't you worth more than he is?

WORPLESDON (*delighted*). You're delicious!

PAULINE (*furiously*). What on earth do you mean? If you were a man, you'd hate to know that I was marrying you for

your money; you'd be begging me to say that I loved you for yourself alone.

WORPLESDON. Isn't it fortunate that I don't?

PAULINE. You mean that I should have to tell lies? I shouldn't mind. I'd rather. Don't grin at me like that. I'm not acting now—I mean it.

WORPLESDON. I know you do. You always say exactly what you mean. That's what makes you so delightful. That's what I love in you. I want you to go on so for ever.

PAULINE (*in an ecstasy of rage*). Gracious heavens! Here have I been slaving away to get a rich husband and have a rest, and now I find that I'm to go on with the same tricks for the rest of my life to keep him amused. Do you know what I've been counting on doing once you were caught?

WORPLESDON. No—what?

PAULINE. Settling down into a nice, conventional married life, and filling a snug position in society. I'm sick of being designedly candid and having everybody able to explain me. I want to give up being a reasonable, consistent adventuress, and be an unreasonable, inconsistent *woman*. I don't want to be transparent and obvious and dependable . . .

WORPLESDON. Not dependable?

PAULINE. No! A dependable woman means a woman who can be depended upon to be quite unwomanly.

WORPLESDON. Now you're joking.

PAULINE. Damn the man! No, I'm not joking.

WORPLESDON (*considering*). Perhaps you are right. You'd . . .

(PAULINE *rises and goes C.*)

WORPLESDON (*watching her*). What's upset you?

PAULINE. That boy's face. I hate hurting anyone, particularly a man—it seems so unnecessary.

WORPLESDON. You didn't consider that when you threw him over.

PAULINE. *That* didn't hurt him enough to talk about. It only shook him up a bit. No—it's you that have hurt him, and I've made you do it—I hate myself for it! I wish you'd go to him now and tell him that you were acting under the influence of drink or something—the sun—and had never thought of proposing to me.

WORPLESDON. Then the most wonderful of schemers would be landed with no rich husband at all—unless we pass you on to the Duke. But I'm not going to . . . (*Tenderly*) I want you for myself . . .

PAULINE (*angrily*). No, you don't. Go away.

WORPLESDON. Pauline! Do you refuse me?

PAULINE. You haven't asked me to marry you, and you're not going to. Go away. I'm in a nasty temper. I've behaved like a cad and I know it, and it doesn't agree with me.

WORPLESDON. If anybody's been a cad, I have.

PAULINE. I made you . . .

WORPLESDON. They don't know that . . .

PAULINE. That man Bently does. Go away.

WORPLESDON (*distractedly*). You're singularly unreasonable. You break with Algernon to allow me to propose to you, and then refuse me because you've hurt Algernon and Bently knows it. No, no, my dear. The only reason you could have for refusing me would be a better opportunity.

PAULINE (*very indignant*). Thank you!

WORPLESDON. Isn't that what you'd say yourself?

PAULINE. Oh, do go away. You're not going to propose to me.

I won't rob Algy of his father—I . . .

(*BENTLY enters up R. and stops apologetically. She hails him.*)

PAULINE. Oh, Mr. Bently, I want to speak to you. (*To WORPLESDON*) Will you excuse me?

WORPLESDON (*furiously*). Oh, certainly.

(*Exits down L. in a huff.*)

PAULINE. Mr. Bently, is that offer still open? That offer to buy me off?

BENTLY. I'm afraid I don't understand you.

PAULINE. The Duke objects to my marrying his cousin even more than to my marrying Algy, I suppose?

BENTLY (*firmly*). The Duke objects to your marrying any member of the family, Mrs. Cheverelle.

PAULINE. Well, he can buy me off now, if he likes.

BENTLY. Mrs. Cheverelle . . .

PAULINE. Yes?

BENTLY. Are you serious?

PAULINE. Quite. Would you like to consult the Duke about it?

BENTLY. His Grace has given me *pleins pouvoirs*. I conveyed to him your refusal to accept his offer immediately after breakfast.

PAULINE. And he answered: "Rubbish! Tell her to name her price."

BENTLY. He did.

PAULINE. Magnificent man.

BENTLY. If you are really to be bought off, I can only suggest that you do so.

PAULINE. Um—how much has he got?

BENTLY. The offer which you refused was five thousand pounds.

PAULINE. All right; we'll say that.

BENTLY. Mrs. Cheverelle, you're not serious.

PAULINE. Yes, I am.

BENTLY. You'll give up twenty thousand a year and a title for . . .

PAULINE. For five thousand—and freedom. Don't you want me to?

BENTLY. Yes—but—I don't understand . . .

PAULINE (*impatiently*). Well, do the other thing, then.

(She raises her parasol and exits up L., leaving him in a state of hopeless perplexity.)

(CURTAIN.)

END OF ACT II.

ACT III

SCENE

THE DRAWING-ROOM AFTER LUNCH

A pretty Louis XIV. in faded rose and old gold. The only door is L. The large mantelpiece and fireplace opposite it R. There are large French windows up C.

An arm-chair is below the fireplace—turned towards the centre of the room. Above the fireplace is a settee. A small table and two chairs stand L.C., and below and above door are other chairs. A large grand piano stands up C. with a double seat at its keyboard—to the R.

LADY O'HOYLE is discovered on the settee engaged upon needle-work. The DUKE is sitting at the grand piano playing over and over a sequence of chords in waltz time : a vamp, in fact. He has the soft pedal rigorously depressed. LADY O'HOYLE looks up at the third repetition of the simple fragment and inquires acidly as to its necessity.

LADY O'H. (*acidly*). Must you ?

KEELS (*seriously*). I'm sorry. (*He desists and studies the keyboard for a moment.*) I was thinking. (*Another pause, then suddenly in an explosion of interrogation*) Why ? Why ? Why ? (*Stops again.*)

LADY O'H. Why what ?

KEELS (*rising and pacing the room*). Why is a woman allowed to go about—husband-hunting like this ?

LADY O'H. (*dryly*). Because nobody knows how to stop her.

KEELS. She must be stopped. I never saw anything so—so blatant ! It's—disgusting.

LADY O'H. Of course it is.

(The DUKE paces the room a moment more in silence, then breaks out again excitedly.)

KEELS. And what do they do—these women ? How do they gain their infamous ends ?

LADY O'H. (*quietly*). Just luck. Some don't.

KEELS. How did Mrs. Cheverelle—I don't mean how did she bring poor Fred up to the scratch—we know that—but—how did she ever get him within bringing distance—ch ?

LADY O'H. *That* was the luck. She happened to fascinate him.

KEELS (*wildly*). But how?

LADY O'H. Oh, good heavens, don't ask me. How does a magnet attract steel? How does the sun draw water?

KEELS. I dunno.

LADY O'H. Every man is attracted by some type of woman. Henry Bently was telling me something about facial angles that might explain it.

KEELS (*unintelligently*). What's "facial angles"?

LADY O'H. (*suiting the answer to his intellect*). People's noses. (*More thoughtfully*) It certainly seems to explain it. Algernon's nose and his father's are very much alike. That might account for their both being attracted by the same woman.

KEELS (*fingering his nose thoughtfully*). They have got the family nose.

LADY O'H. Yes.

KEELS (*slowly*). So have I. . . . I haven't considered Mrs. Cheverelle's—er—facial angle as yet, but now you mention it, it is decidedly attractive.

LADY O'H. (*looking up apprehensively*). Horace! . . .

KEELS (*mechanically*). He is standing c. in deep thought). Yes?

LADY O'H. (*changing her mind*). Nothing.

KEELS (*very seriously*). Did Bently mention whether facial angles worked both ways?

LADY O'H. (*puzzled*). What?

KEELS. I mean whether there mightn't be some type of nose that would attract her—just as hers attracts—my cousin and Algernon? If it's a law of nature it ought to work both ways.

LADY O'H. It is generally allowed that the laws of nature apply exclusively to males.

KEELS. Oh! (*Goes to piano, and standing at the keyboard recommences his musical performance.*)

LADY O'H. Horace!

KEELS. I'm sorry, Mary. (*Desists.*) You don't know how I regret that I never thoroughly mastered the piano. Music is such an aid to concentration.

(BENTLY passes the window, looks in, and then enters.)

BENTLY (*standing above the piano*). I've been looking everywhere for you, sir. May I have a moment?

(LADY O'HOYLE rises.)

KEELS. Sit still, Mary. I've no secrets from you. (*To Bently*) Well?

BENTLY. Mrs. Cheverelle has accepted our offer, sir.

KEELS (*wondering*). What offer?

BENTLY. Five thousand pounds to break it off.

KEELS. But she's broken it off already, and Worplesdon . . .

BENTLY. Five thousand to break it off with Lord Worplesdon, sir.

LADY O'H. (*genuinely amazed*). Well I never!

KEELS (*intensely gratified*). You've talked her over? Good man!
BENTLY (*quietly*). There was no need to, sir: she approached me.

LADY O'H. She approached you?

KEELS (*stupidly*). She—approached—you? When?

BENTLY. Before lunch—immediately after Lord Worplesdon's announcement. I have since sent her a cheque and received her written acknowledgment.

LADY O'H. Now what on earth . . .

KEELS (*slowly, and with intense conviction*). My God! She's after me!

(*They both turn and look at him. He has sunk on to the piano-stool again, staring, transfixed with horror.*)

BENTLY (*lightly*). Really, sir . . .

KEELS (*continuing in a trance*). I have already noticed her nose . . .

BENTLY. I beg your pardon, sir?

KEELS (*with growing conviction*). It has—undoubtedly—a very pretty quirk . . .

BENTLY (*reassuringly*). I see no reason for you to fear, sir.

KEELS. What? Why, I—I admire the woman already!

BENTLY. Very possibly, sir; but that's no proof that she has cast her eye upon you.

KEELS. You yourself said that the field was limited to Worplesdon and me when she—passed Algernon by. Now she's passed Worplesdon, isn't it limited to me?

BENTLY. I said if she was actuated by reason . . .

KEELS. Well, doesn't this prove more than ever that she *is*?

BENTLY. I don't see how, sir.

KEELS (*very indignantly*). What d'you mean—you don't see how? Aren't I a better catch than Worplesdon?

BENTLY. Undoubtedly.

KEELS. Yes! "Undoubtedly!" And do you think she's such a fool as not to know it?

BENTLY (*tactfully*). Mrs. Cheverelle must, of course, know that you are the best catch possible, but her good sense must tell her that *you* are beyond her wiles.

KEELS. Must it? She's seen me looking at her nose—subconsciously, for I swear I haven't wittingly—yet I *must* have noticed it, for I can describe it most minutely—she must have seen that, and she knows I'm on the hook. I can feel a queer fascination already! (*In pitiful terror*) Good God, what an awful thing!

(*The door opens. They all jump and turn as LORD WORPLESDON looks into the room. He hesitates at the sight of the others, and stands hovering on the door-handle.*)

WORPLESDON. Have you seen Algernon anywhere, Mary?

LADY O'H. Not since this morning. He wasn't at lunch.

KEELS. Neither was Mrs. Cheverelle . . .

LADY O'H. (*pointing to WORPLESDON*). Neither were you.

WORPLESDON. No—I (*making up his mind*)—I suppose I must inform you, Mary—(*he is studiously ignoring the DUKE*)—that it was a mistake about Mrs. Cheverelle having promised to marry me.

LADY O'H. (*dryly*). A mistake?

WORPLESDON (*lamely*). Yes: I thought I had caused her to throw Algernon over under the impression that I wished to propose, and consequently I felt bound to—to . . . (*He slows up and stops before LADY O'H.'s eye.*)

LADY O'H. (*critically*). That's pretty feeble.

WORPLESDON. What do you mean?

LADY O'H. I mean that if you can't lie any better than that you'd better stick to the truth.

WORPLESDON (*with a gleam of anger*). You want the truth?

LADY O'H. No; but I hate bad lies. I suppose you're trying to tell us that she's thrown you over now?

WORPLESDON (*his voice trembling with suppressed anger which grows as he speaks*). Yes, I am trying to tell you that she has thrown me over. Do you want to know why? Because my noble cousin here has insulted her!—Offered her money—a cheque for five thousand—to buy her off.

KEELS (*amazed*). Frederick, how . . .

WORPLESDON (*turning on him*). How do I know? (*Producing a letter from his pocket*) That's how I know. (*Withdrawing letter*) There's her letter and (*scattering a dozen fragments on the floor*)—there's your cheque.

KEELS (*once more dumbfounded*). Well, I'm . . .

WORPLESDON (*with stinging sarcasm*). Can't you think of a word? I call you a blackguard, Horace. Fancy daring to offer her money!

KEELS (*apologetically*). I never knew she'd take it. Bently told me she wouldn't.

WORPLESDON (*in intense scorn*). Bently told you she wouldn't! Well, Bently was right—she hasn't. There's your five thousand safe in the bank to play fresh tricks with.

(*He stamps out through the French windows, leaving the others—the DUKE on the piano-stool, LADY O'H. on her settee, and BENTLY above piano C.—In an abyss of amazement and dismay.*)

LADY O'H. (*after a pause*). Well, what do you make of this, Henry?

BENTLY. I don't know exactly. (*He comes around the piano and starts pacing up and down.*)

LADY O'H. You don't know exactly! Is it possible?

KEELS (*settling one point.*) Well, if she marries me, Bently, I shall hold you responsible.

BENTLY (*shortly and certainly*). She won't marry you, sir ; she has given up her calculating course.

KEELS (*irritably*). That's like the nonsense about barking dogs never biting ! Who's to know when they're going to stop barking ? Who's to know when she's going to return to her calculating course—eh ? This is all a trick to throw us off our guard, and when we're none of us sure which way to look she'll—drop all this nonsense and nab me.

BENTLY (*rudely*). I don't think she will, sir.

KEELS. Why, it's as plain as daylight ! She . . .

BENTLY (*raising his voice and speaking even more rudely*). I say I don't think she will, sir.

LADY O'H. Well, don't lose your temper, Henry. What is there to get angry about ?

BENTLY (*dropping his offensive attitude as he realises it, and speaking with humorous hopelessness*). Oh, I don't know.

KEELS (*unwilling to drop the quarrel*). You "don't think she will, sir" ? Why don't you think she will ? Aren't I a good enough catch for her ? Do you think she's after you ?

BENTLY. Sir !

KEELS (*a little ashamed of the jibe*). Well, what do you think ? I say : aren't I a good enough catch for her ?

BENTLY (*coldly*). You'd better ask her, sir.

KEELS. Huh ! And get snapped up . . .

BENTLY (*losing his temper again and raising his voice*). Yes, since you're so sure . . .

LADY O'H. (*checking him kindly, as before*). Henry, Henry, Henry ! You really are a very quarrelsome boy to-day. What's the matter with you ?

BENTLY (*checking himself and shaking his head*). Goodness knows ! (*Pauses a second.*) I think I'll go for a walk. (*Another pause.*) I beg your pardon, sir, if I've been rude.

(*The DUKE is still snorting angrily and takes no notice.*)

LADY O'H. (*gently*). Henry has the courtesy to beg your pardon, Horace.

KEELS (*ungraciously*). That's all right. He's jealous.

BENTLY. Jealous ?

LADY O'H. Go and have your walk, Henry, and don't row any more till you know what you're rowing about.

BENTLY. Thank you, Lady O'Hoyle ; I will.

(*He goes to door and opens it as MRS. CHEVERELLE is on the point of doing so from the other side. He draws back to let her pass in, but she hesitates on seeing the others.*)

PAULINE (*nervously*). I—won't come in. I was only looking for . . .

BENTLY (*very politely, with a side glance at the DUKE*). Please come in, Mrs. Cheverelle. I believe the Duke wants to speak to you.

(KEELS jumps on hearing this and casts an appealing look at BENTLY, who refuses to see it. PAULINE enters. BENTLY exits, closing door.)

PAULINE (*to the DUKE*). You wanted to speak to me? (*She sits L. of table L.C.*)

KEELS (*in an agony of apprehension*). Yes, yes. I mean no, oh no! Not at all!

PAULINE. I beg your pardon, Mr. Bently said . . .

KEELS. Yes, yes—I . . . (*She looks at him inquiringly, he trembles.*) Nothing, nothing.

(*A long pause ensues. KEELS, seeking vainly for an escape, rises once, but MRS. CHEVERELLE looking up he immediately resumes his seat and smiles at her nervously, then fearing that the smile may be misunderstood he changes it for a severe frown suggesting great preoccupation. She looks away again. He at last decides that conversation is safer than this silence and commences chattily.*)

KEELS. It's a pleasant nose . . . (*He stops, thunderstruck at what he has said.*)

LADY O'H. Horace!

PAULINE (*puzzled*). I beg your pardon.

KEELS (*correcting himself anxiously*). I mean *day*. It's a pleasant *day*. My nose slipped—I mean my tongue. (*Rising*) Who did you say you were looking for?

PAULINE. Looking for? Oh—Algy. I wanted . . .

KEELS (*with alacrity*). I'll find him for you. (*Exits hastily through French window.*)

(*PAULINE with a little sigh rests her elbows on the table and her chin on her hands. LADY O'H. rises and collects needle-work; then she turns and looks at PAULINE critically.*)

LADY O'H. Headache?

PAULINE. No. I feel muddled . . .

LADY O'H. (*dryly*). What? You, too?

PAULINE. There's no train till five. I don't know what to do till then.

LADY O'H. You're really going?

PAULINE. Oh yes.

LADY O'H. I really think I ought to thank you.

PAULINE. Thank me?

LADY O'H. For the very interesting little spectacle you have provided for us. There are two things in the world a woman

loves to see: woman triumphant and woman floored.
(*Crosses to door.*) Well . . .

(ALGERNON *enters through window.* PAULINE, *active, rises and greets him.*)

PAULINE (*almost pleading*). Oh, Algy . . . (*She checks herself and glances round at LADY O'H. at the door.*)

LADY O'H. All right. I'm going.

PAULINE. No—it's nothing important.

LADY O'H. Then I certainly shan't stay. (*Exits.*)

ALGERNON (*coming down c.*). Do you want to speak to me?

PAULINE. Yes. Algy (*persuasively*)—will you drive me to the station?

ALGERNON (*surprised*). The station?

PAULINE. Yes. There's no train till five, and the servants will think I'm mad if I ask them to drive me there so early. I want to get away . . .

ALGERNON (*puzzled*). I don't understand you.

PAULINE (*looking at him*). Oh, don't you know?

ALGERNON. Know what?

PAULINE. Hasn't your father told you?

ALGERNON. I haven't seen the Dad since this morning. I was looking for him now to say good-bye.

PAULINE. To say good-bye?

ALGERNON. Yes. I'm motoring down to Portsmouth to join Archie Vownes for a trip to Egypt. The car'll be . . .

PAULINE (*understanding*). You're going away because of me?

ALGERNON (*evasively*). Oh, it's an old invitation.

PAULINE. But you're accepting it because of me; aren't you?

ALGERNON (*his face hardening*). Because of the Dad, if you like. You can't expect me to be very chummy with him—for a few weeks, anyway—after the way he's behaved.

PAULINE. You're blaming him for having made a fool of himself over me! (*Touched*) Algy, that's very nice of you!

ALGERNON. Nice of me?

PAULINE. Don't you blame *me* at all?

ALGERNON. He was my father. . . . I blame you for your share.

PAULINE (*brightly*). Oh, but, my dear boy, you ought to blame me for his share, too! You're really very ungenerous.

ALGERNON (*puzzled*). Ungenerous?

PAULINE. Yes—it's most ungenerous to blame a man when there's a woman in the case.

ALGERNON. Don't be cynical.

PAULINE. I'm not. By blaming your father you make both yourself and him miserable. By blaming *me* you can forgive him anything—can't you?

ALGERNON. A bit hard on you.

PAULINE. Not a bit of it. I'm used to it. All women are. It really makes no difference to the sensible ones, because they know that a man can blame a woman for everything under the sun, and like her all the better for it. (*She smiles at him cheerfully.*)

ALGERNON (*looking at her admiringly*). Yes; I suppose you're right; the Dad couldn't help himself.

PAULINE (*cheerfully*). That's the tone. So you can forgive him—especially now that I'm not going to marry him.

ALGERNON (*astonished*). What?

PAULINE (*quietly*). If you'd met him he'd have told you. He just made a mistake this morning.

ALGERNON (*slowly taking it in*). Just made a . . . You've thrown him over! Why? (*Suddenly*) No—stop—I know! (*Jubilantly*) You're after the Duke!

PAULINE (*very angrily*). No, I am *not* after the Duke.

ALGERNON (*surprised at her outburst*). Sorry!

PAULINE (*regaining her good humour*). No—it's all right, Algy. You couldn't think anything else. (*Pauses a second; then*) Oh, drive me to the station, there's a dear boy. I've made a hopeless mess of things.

ALGERNON. Peter, I hate to see you looking so down. Can I do nothing better for you than see you off the premises?

PAULINE (*decidedly*). No, nothing. I've estranged you and your father; the Duke's frightened to death of me; Lady O'Hoyle laughs at me; Mr. Bently despises me—heartily. Help me to get away. It's the kindest thing you can do.

ALGERNON (*gently*). All right, Peter. I'll go and hurry up that car.

(*He crosses to door and exits. PAULINE goes up to piano and sits running her fingers over the keyboard. Tschaikovsky's "Nay, though my heart should break" is running in her head, and she would sing it if she could.*)

(*BENTLY enters by door and comes straight to her; he is carrying a letter in an unstamped envelope in his hand.*)

BENTLY. Mrs. Cheverelle!

PAULINE (*looking up, startled*). Yes?

BENTLY (*shaking the letter at her in hopeless bewilderment and indignation mixed with plaintiveness*). What is the meaning of this?

(*PAULINE glances at the letter in his hand, but makes no attempt to reply. She seems extremely nervous.*)

BENTLY (*continuing in a most injured tone*). I was just going for a walk when this (*waving the letter*)—was brought to me. Wha—wha—(*incoherent with mystified resentment*)—why did you write it. What's it all about? What harm have I done

to you? (*Pauses again for a reply; she is quite as much at a loss for one.*) Surely you don't bear me any ill-will for having been the mere intermediary in the matter of that cheque?

PAULINE (*defending herself*). Have I said that I do?

BENTLY. No, no. But—there's a—*reproachful* tone about the whole letter that . . .

PAULINE (*sincerely*). I'm sorry.

BENTLY (*hastily retreating*). No, no, nothing to be sorry for if you didn't mean it—only—(*bursting out again with his injury*) why did you write such a letter at all? (*Referring to it*) Talking about my "despising you," and "being beaten," and—"I've won!"

PAULINE. Did I say that?

BENTLY. Five times in three pages! The letter's practically nothing else. (*Reading*) "You've won, and I'm going"—"You despised me the first moment you set eyes on me, and determined to beat me; well, you've won!" I never despised you!

PAULINE (*incredulously*). Never?

BENTLY. No, never . . . (*Hedging*) Well—not seriously—(*his injured tone rising again*)—and here you . . . (*Waving the letter*) Why did you write it? Did you want to convince me that I've behaved like a brute and a cad?

PAULINE (*shocked*). Oh no!

BENTLY. Well, you do. (*Expostulating*) It's most unjust of you. There's no question of my—winning, as you put it. I merely made you an offer on the Duke's behalf, and you accepted it. I didn't force you to accept it, did I?

PAULINE (*with considerable misgiving*). No.

BENTLY. You sound as if you considered that I had.

PAULINE (*quickly*). No, no—(*pausing*)—only . . . Well, you wanted me to accept, didn't you?

BENTLY. Not particularly.

PAULINE (*spitefully*). Yes, you did. You'd made up your mind that I was only after money, and you wanted to prove that you were right.

BENTLY (*protesting*). Mrs. Cheverelle . . .

PAULINE (*continuing angrily*). Well, I didn't want to disappoint you.

BENTLY (*studying her more calmly*). Mrs. Cheverelle, I don't understand you.

PAULINE (*with a short laugh of triumph at the admission*). Don't you? Well, I'm going in a few minutes.

BENTLY (*wondering*). You're allowing yourself to be beaten in sight of success. It's beyond reason.

PAULINE (*provokingly*). You're a clever man. I should have thought you could assign a reason to anything.

BENTLY (*simply*). Well, I can't.

PAULINE (*with a shade of resentment*). When I threw Algy over, you explained why I did it to everyone's satisfaction.

BENTLY. I did—and I was right.

PAULINE. You were. Well, can't you repeat the trick?

BENTLY. If I did, I should say that you were after the Duke.

PAULINE (*angrily*). Oh!

BENTLY (*soothingly*). But I don't say it, because I don't think it.

PAULINE (*gratefully*). Thank you.

BENTLY (*calmly*). I don't know what to think. You've done such surprising things.

(PAULINE *chuckles in spite of herself*.)

BENTLY (*continuing after a reproachful look at her*). Writing this letter, and tearing up the cheque . . .

PAULINE (*startled*). Oh, you know I did that?

BENTLY. You see, you didn't mean us to know, as you would have done if you had had any—reason—plan . . .

PAULINE (*rising and going wearily to fireplace*). Mr. Bently, I had no reason for tearing up the cheque. I did it on the impulse of the moment. I have no plan . . . no wish, except to get away from here.

BENTLY (*fearfully upset*). But it will be awful if you go like this! We shan't know whether we've treated you very badly—or—how . . .

PAULINE (*wearily*). You've won . . .

BENTLY (*furiously*). Don't keep on saying that! I haven't won. I've never wanted to win. I'll tell you honestly—this letter—it's upset me. I don't like you to feel that I've got the best of you by trickery, and that I've driven you away. I . . .

PAULINE. Would you rather I married Algy, after all?

BENTLY. No, I wouldn't. You'd be wasted on him.

PAULINE. Oh?

BENTLY (*retracting hastily*). No, I don't mean that. (*Decidedly*) Yes, I believe I would rather you married Algy, if I were sure you wanted to.

PAULINE. Well, I don't. I don't know what I want. I don't understand myself—I should like to.

BENTLY. So should I.

PAULINE (*turning to him*). Shall we try? Go over my conduct step by step, and try and see what on earth I've been up to.

BENTLY. It would be interesting.

PAULINE (*sitting on chair below fireplace*). Let's. How do we begin?

BENTLY (*judicially*). Who are you?

PAULINE (*promptly*). Pauline Cheverelle, widow, hard up.

BENTLY. What did you come here for?

PAULINE. To get round Algy's people and get them to let me marry him.

BENTLY. For his money ?

PAULINE. For the general convenience of being his wife.

BENTLY. Why did you break with Algy ?

PAULINE. Because I saw that I stood a securer chance of marrying his father.

BENTLY. Quite right—so you did. Now—(*emphasising the question*) why did you throw over Lord Worplesdon ?

(PAULINE'S flow of ready answers stops. She thinks hard.)

BENTLY (*after giving her a moment, helpfully*). Wasn't it because you saw reason to hope that you could marry the Duke himself ?

PAULINE (*quietly, but with conviction*). No.

BENTLY (*perfectly pleasantly*). Are you sure ?

PAULINE. Certain. Honest Injun.

BENTLY. You must have had some idea in your mind ?

PAULINE (*lamely*). I didn't want to upset Algy.

BENTLY. That was very nice of you.

PAULINE (*uncertainly*). Ye—es.

BENTLY. Still, you might have thought of that before. Was there no other reason—idea at the back of your mind ?

PAULINE (*trying hard to think*). I was annoyed.

BENTLY. Annoyed ?

PAULINE. Yes.

BENTLY. What at ?

PAULINE. I was annoyed that you should have seen through me so.

BENTLY. You make a business of being seen through.

PAULINE (*irrelevantly*). This is most interesting, dissecting me like this—isn't it ?

BENTLY. Most. Please stick to the point. You make a business of being seen through, don't you ?

PAULINE. Ye—es.

BENTLY. So why . . .

PAULINE. No, I *don't* make a business of being seen through, and I don't know why it annoyed me, but when I saw you looking at me the way you'd look at a dead worm, I wanted to go for you with a hatpin. It was because I'd hurt Algy, and I knew it, and I hated you for knowing that I knew it.

BENTLY (*smiling*). A little involved, still—interesting. You gave up a title and a fortune because you resented the way I was looking at you. How did that benefit you ?

PAULINE. It made you look a little less sure of yourself, anyway.

BENTLY. True. I suppose I looked thunderstruck ?

PAULINE (*delighted at the recollection*). You did.

BENTLY. I felt so. I followed you all over the wood before sending you the cheque, I was so—interested.

PAULINE (*happily*). Then my behaviour had some effect on you, whatever its motive was ?

BENTLY. Yes. I wonder . . . (*in deep thought*).

PAULINE (*interested*). What?

BENTLY. It's a new method of reasoning to judge the motive of an act by the effect it has; still . . . (*Suddenly*) You were glad to see that it had that effect upon me?

PAULINE. I was.

BENTLY. Then it may be the right method—when trying to understand a woman. Following that method, the motive for your next step—the tearing up of the cheque—was to excite my interest still more.

PAULINE. That was the effect it had?

BENTLY. That was certainly the effect it had. I was so interested that I believe I would have followed you had you left here without explaining yourself.

PAULINE. I'm glad.

BENTLY. Which proves that it was the effect you wanted it to have.

PAULINE. . . . Though I didn't know it at the time.

BENTLY. Quite possibly. One doesn't always know one's motives. Now—last of all—why on earth did you write this letter?

PAULINE. I don't know.

BENTLY. We must judge by its effect, then.

PAULINE. Yes; what was its effect on you?

BENTLY (*laughing*). Upon my word, it roused my interest in you to such an extent that I wanted to take a poker to you.

PAULINE (*nodding very sagely*). Love!

BENTLY (*dazzled by the conviction that he has found the truth at last*). Pauline! Is that what you've been playing for?—to make me fall in love with you?

(*Dropping on one knee beside her and putting his arm almost roughly around her.*)

PAULINE. That seems to be the effect it's had.

BENTLY. Have you been acting all this time, to catch me? Is this your art? . . .

PAULINE. I don't know. It's been pretty good acting, hasn't it?

BENTLY (*laughing*). Effective!

PAULINE. Then isn't it just possible that it's been—inspired?

(*He kisses her reverently.* ALGERNON *enters.*)

ALGERNON. I've got the car—oh, I beg your pardon!

BENTLY (*rising happily*). Gossamore, you can congratulate me. . . .

(*The DUKE, LADY O'H., and WORPLESDON are passing the window. The DUKE looks in on hearing the last words.*)

KEELS. Eh? What's that?

BENTLY. Mrs. Cheverelle has promised to be my wife, sir.

KEELS (*grasping the situation and hastening forward to wring BENTLY'S hand, with deep gratitude*). Bently—you've done this for me ! I'll never forget it !

(CURTAIN.)



ELAINE

COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

CHARACTERS

JOHN CURTIS.

ELAINE.

GERALD FELLOWES.

HON. MICHAEL SEELBY.

REV. SIR PETER PHILOX.

LADY PHILOX, *Sister to Curtis.*

HENRY, *Servant at the Westmeath.*

LOUISE, *Elaine's Maid.*

The action of the play passes between four in the afternoon and midnight, in July, the scene being laid at Llangwilloc, North Wales.

ACT I., SCENE I.—*The small reading-room of the Westmeath Hotel, four in the afternoon. SCENE 2 is a grassy ledge overlooking the sea an hour later.*

ACT II.—*The garden of the Westmeath between nine and ten in the evening.*

ACT III., SCENE I.—*The small reading-room again, eleven in the evening. SCENE 2, Curtis's private room immediately after.*



ACT I

SCENE

THE SMALL READING-ROOM OF THE WESTMEATH HOTEL,
LLANGWILLOC, NORTH WALES

A cosy apartment in dark green leather and modern oak.

There is a fireplace R. with a high, upholstered library fender in brass and leather. A door opens into the hall L., and large folding-doors communicate with the large reading-room at back. These are thrown wide open, and show, beyond the long windows of the inner room, a verandah, and beyond that the cloudless blue sky above the open sea.

On either side of the fireplace is a bookshelf. A small green leather Chesterfield settee stands above fireplace, and a leather easy-chair is below it facing out into the room. A large library table occupies the centre of the room with a chair at its L. end, and another above it. Another Chesterfield is down L. with its back to the audience.

The room is agreeably cool and shady, though the inner room is lighter, and the verandah and sky beyond show that it is a blazing hot afternoon. It is just four p.m. as the curtain rises, and HENRI, an ordinary Swiss man-servant, enters L. and holds open the door for SIR PETER and LADY PHILOX to enter. The former, a plump, clerical-looking bon-vivant of fifty-five, with fat hands and an easy, well-bred manner, crosses to hearth-rug, and stands there looking approvingly at the room. LADY PHILOX pauses L. of table, resting her hand upon it. She is an aggressively respectable member of the aristocracy, about fifty years of age. Both she and her husband are in summer "out of town" dress, with travelling et ceteras.

HENRI (*closing door and indicating room*). You will find this the most comfortable room, Milady. It is generally empty. I will see that your bags are taken upstairs directly. We did not expect you until the evening train. Your room is not quite ready.

LADY P. (*taking off gloves*). Will it be long?

HENRI. Scarcely five minutes, Milady.

SIR PETER (*cheerfully*). Facing the sea?

HENRI. All the bedrooms are facing the sea, Milor'.

SIR PETER (*raising his eyebrows*). All ?

HENRI. Some a little more than others, per'aps, Milor', but all more or less.

LADY P. (*asserting herself*). We asked for a bedroom *quite* facing the sea ; and, of course, we require a southern aspect.

HENRI (*with deference*). The sea lies to the north-west, Milady, but if the room is unsatisfactory very likely some alteration can be made.

LADY P. (*dismissing him*). Thank you. Please let us know directly our room is ready.

HENRI (*lingering with glad tidings*). One of our visitors wished to know as soon as you arrived, Milady. I was to inform him immediately. Mister Seelby, Milady. (*Goes towards larger room.*)

LADY P. (*sharply—almost apprehensively*). Mister Seelby—Mister Michael Seelby ?

HENRI. Yes, Milady. (*Goes across inner room, and out through French window and along verandah to R.*)

LADY P. (*drawing out chair and sitting down with an air of hopeless annoyance*). And we came here for a rest.

SIR PETER (*calmly*). Who is it, my dear ? I didn't quite catch . . .

LADY P. Micky Seelby. You remember him. He rather impressed you at Ada Teighton's by calling you "Pete."

SIR PETER (*with a shade of regret*). Oh yes, I remember him now. A charming young man—so amusing.

LADY P. (*grimly*). Very. We shan't have a moment's peace. There's no suppressing Micky. He'll be the life and soul of the place. (*With a touch of temper*) It really seems impossible to go anywhere nowadays without meeting everyone one wants to get away from. Who'd ever expect to find Micky in a little place like this ?

SIR PETER (*sententiously*). It's a small world, my dear ; and Llangwilloc is gaining in popularity. I shouldn't be surprised if we found a dozen intimate acquaintances all staying in this very hotel.

LADY P. No such luck. There'd be some chance of sharing Micky with them, then. No. We shall have him all to ourselves.

SIR PETER. Some people are quite different out of town. He may—h'm.

(MICKY is heard in the distance yelping with delight. He bursts energetically in from verandah and crosses larger room to greet LADY PHILOX, who gives SIR PETER an expressive glance as he approaches.)

MICKY. Yip, yip, yip ! Hello, hello ! (*Shaking hands warmly with LADY PHILOX.*) How are you ? Merry and bright, eh ? Thank goodness here's someone to talk to at last ! I am

glad to see you. How's Pete, eh? (*Crosses and shakes hands with SIR PETER.*) Good old Pete! Sit tha' doon, laad!

SIR PETER (*with some dignity*). I prefer to stand, thanks.

MICKY (*unceremoniously pushing him into easy-chair below fire*). Nonsense—after that journey . . .

SIR PETER. I was seated all the way.

MICKY (*crossing to Chesterfield down L. and patting it up*). Try this, Lady Phil.

LADY P. I am quite comfortable where I am, thanks.

MICKY (*sympathetically*). Too tired to move? Not a bit of it.

Give me your hand. (*Pulls her by both hands out of chair, and swings her round into Chesterfield.*) There, isn't that a lot better? I can't bear to see people uncomfy. (*Hoists himself on to table C., where he sits with his legs dangling. He is a man of little less than the average height. Twenty-five to thirty years of age, with large hands and feet and a countenance lined and distorted by an exuberant facetiousness which has twisted one of his thick eyebrows out of the horizontal. The social buffoon is his rôle, and he plays it for all he is worth. He sits on the table talking right and left at great speed.*) Well, how's things? You haven't taken long to strike the best room in the place. Cosy, isn't it? How's Nelly?

SIR PETER. I believe that my daughter is quite well and happy.

MICKY. So she ought to be. Gosh, what a catch! (*To LADY P.*) You never invited me to the wedding.

LADY P. Didn't we? There was such a crush.

MICKY. I bet there was. Never mind. I stayed at home and nursed my breaking heart. You didn't know that I was sweet on Nelly myself, did you, Pete?

SIR PETER. Er . . . No . . . I did not.

MICKY. I *was*, though. Seriously! But of course Lady Phil was quite right to turn me down when the great Auk came along.

SIR PETER. Lord Orchardson was, of course, an excellent match; but it was our daughter's happiness that we considered.

MICKY. Quite right, quite right! Even happiness must be considered sometimes. Well, you've secured *hers*. Twelve thousand a year and two titles ought to make her happy enough to cry. Tired, Lady Phil?

LADY P. A little.

MICKY. It's a beast of a journey from town, but it's worth it when you get here. Not like one of those places where you're simply bound to meet scores of people you don't want to. I hate landing in a place and finding the biggest bore of my acquaintance waiting to greet me; don't you?

SIR PETER. Er—yes (*glancing at his wife*).

MICKY (*rattling on*). This is a perfectly topping place, though. I've only been here a week; came down absolutely done up

after keeping you all merry and bright in town, and look at me now ! Got the energy of ten ordinary Mickies !

SIR PETER. Do you often come here, Mister Seelby ?

MICKY. Every blessed summer. Have done for years. Didn't you know ? I flattered myself that was what brought you down.

LADY P. No—we didn't know.

MICKY. Surely you remember my telling you about the place at Tiggie's.

SIR PETER (*inquiringly*). Tiggie's ?

LADY P. (*enlightening him*). Ada Teighton's.

SIR PETER. Thank you.

MICKY. Don't you remember ? The Boojum was cracking up some Sanyol place he'd struck, and I backed Llangwilloc against it.

LADY P. Oh yes ; I remember now. But you said you stayed at an Hydro. This is not an Hydro.

MICKY. No—that's true. But I've got into the habit of calling it one ever since my old Dad died here. It really is a perfectly topping place, and so restful . . .

SIR PETER. Are you an authority on resting, Mr. Seelby ?

MICKY. Bless you, yes—first-class diploma—wait till I've put you through a fortnight's "far from the madding crowd"—you'll never want to go back to town. You'll want to stay here and gas about being buried amongst starry daisies—like Gerry.

LADY P. (*looking up*). Gerald ? Is he here ?

(MICKY *nods emphatically*.)

SIR PETER (*inquiringly of his wife*). Gerald, my dear . . . ?

LADY P. Gerald Fellowes, the poet.

SIR PETER. Oh yes ! A most charming young man ! So intellectual.

MICKY (*frankly*). I'm fed up on him. He won't be amused, Lady Phil. Brought me down here for company, and absolutely bores me to death. Yawns and looks *distrain* when I talk to him.

LADY P. Indeed !

SIR PETER. I have always heard Mister Fellowes described as most interesting.

MICKY. Maybe. But he's a bore all the same. An interesting bore, if you like. There are interesting bores as well as dull ones. Borishness can be combined with any blessed quality under the sun. Clever bores—dull bores—amusing bores—ever met an amusing bore, Lady Phil ?

LADY P. Yes, Micky, I *have*.

MICKY. Terrors, aren't they ?

SIR PETER. Is there anyone else here whom we know ?

MICKY (*shaking his head*). Don't fancy so. Two or three North-country families *en masse* ; spend a lot and eat a lot, but not the right way. There's one other chap here worth knowing

besides Gerry and me—at least his wife's worth knowing. He's a bit of a knut himself.

LADY P. Do I know him?

MICKY. Oh no. Manchester man. Smokes a bull-dog pipe and wears boots an inch thick and goes off for walks all day on his own. His wife's a jolly smart woman, though. Pretty, too! Gerry's found that out.

LADY P. Gerald?

MICKY (*nodding violently*). Umhum! Gone coon! Toddles about with her all day long while hubby's off on his rambles. He's waiting for her now to go for a walk. It's a case. He told me yesterday that she was the most interesting psychological study he had ever met.

LADY P. That sounds serious.

SIR PETER. And the lady? Is she too a psychologist?

MICKY. Well, you know what women are with Fellowes, Lady Phil. She's always on ice—*très digne*, as we say in the army—but—well—I think she's a bit sweet on the child. She discusses her husband with him, so you see they have interests in common.

SIR PETER. One interest, at all events.

MICKY. An absorbing one, Pete! As a well-brought-up clergyman you can have no idea of the number of heart-to-heart conversations that a young wife and a sympathetic young man can indulge in on the subject of the lady's husband.

SIR PETER (*with an attempt at knowingness*). Can't I?

MICKY. As a clergyman I trust not. As a husband I hope, for your peace of mind's sake, you haven't.

LADY P. Micky, don't be rude.

MICKY (*deeply hurt*). Not rude, Lady Phil, not rude. Impertinent, yes, but not rude.

LADY P. Well, don't be impertinent, then.

MICKY. Oh, but I must. Impertinence is my long suit. I've got a reputation for it. It's much easier to be impertinent than funny, and it goes down twice as well with people of refinement. Destroys any latent self-respect, and they like it. Don't you, Pete?

SIR PETER (*with dignity*). I am not anxious to have my self-respect destroyed, Mister Seelby.

MICKY. Tsh, tsh, tsh! You're old-fashioned! It's as much trouble as a vermiform appendix. Makes one look ridiculous . . .

LADY P. (*sharply*). Micky!

MICKY (*humbly*). Pardon, Auntie, I do rattle on, don't I? What were we talking about? Oh, I know. Giraldo and the fair Elaine. That's her name. Pretty, isn't it?

LADY P. Do you really think this is anything serious?

MICKY. Did you ever know Gerry when he wasn't serious? Giraldo Serioso, I call him. He was pretty serious over Lurline, wasn't he?

SIR PETER. Lurline ?

LADY P. (*explaining*). Violet Vanderzee. She threw Gerald over and married Archie Vownes.

SIR PETER. Yes, yes. I recall something about her. But why call her Lurline ?

MICKY. Haven't you read Gerry's pome, "Lurline" ? She's it.

SIR PETER (*interested*). Really ? No, I haven't read it, but I certainly shall. Poetry becomes doubly interesting when one knows what it is about. Hidden thoughts . . .

LADY P. (*severely to MICKY*). So you're allowing Gerald to fall in love with a married woman ?

MICKY. Allowing ? I like that ! He doesn't need much allowing. But don't you worry, Lady Phil, I've got my eye on the child. I know how things are going. They haven't exhausted hubby yet. It's fairly non-committal to discuss a lady's husband with her. It's a subject number two that I'm watching for.

SIR PETER. And what is subject number two ?

MICKY. Gerry's past, of course.

LADY P. (*indignantly*). What do you mean by Gerald's "past" ?

MICKY (*soothingly*). Oh, nothing serious. Only Lurline. She's the subject number two that I'm watching for. You take it from your Uncle Micky, Pete, when Gerry starts confiding his blighted hopes in Lurline to the present lady it will be time to throw out the lifeline. Why, to tell a woman about a previous love affair almost amounts to a declaration. Aren't I right, Lady Phil ? You know.

LADY P. (*thoughtfully*). There is certainly something in what you say, Micky.

MICKY. Aha, Pete ! She's giving you away.

SIR PETER. My dear Mary . . .

LADY P. (*looking down*). I was not thinking of Sir Peter as an example.

MICKY (*immensely tickled*). Oho ! Oho ! One in the eye for you, Pete !

LADY P. (*not ill pleased*). Micky !

SIR PETER. Your rules of courtship are quaint, Mister Seelby. Quite amusing.

MICKY. And they're right, too. You wait and see.

SIR PETER. They are together a great deal ?

MICKY. Every day and all day. Climb the Head together, and sit on the top together and look at the sea together, and discuss hubby together *ad lib.* ; and Gerry spouts Shelley and Blake and his old pal Lovelace to her—and she pretends to like it.

SIR PETER. And the husband ?

MICKY. Oh, old Curtis . . .

(*Husband and wife exchange swift glances.*)

MICKY. Hullo ! Have I put my foot in it. Do you know them ?

SIR PETER. Lady Philox was a Curtis.

MICKY. Gosh, yes! I'd forgotten. I wonder if . . . Not got any long-lost relations bobbing around in the *ewigkeit*, have you, Lady Phil?

LADY P. Only my brother John, who should inherit the title.

MICKY. Why, of course! The Bush-whacker Baronet.

LADY P. (*severely*). No, Micky, however foolish John may have been he never went on the music-halls.

MICKY (*surprised*). Who says he did? He was out in Australia, wasn't he?

LADY P. Yes.

MICKY. Well—everyone calls him the B.B.

SIR PETER. I have heard him referred to so—though I tried to keep it from Mary.

LADY P. (*annoyed*). It's extremely foolish. He has never used the title. His name isn't even in the baronetage—and he's been back from Australia quite fifteen years.

MICKY. I wonder if this can be he. His name is John, right enough. Is your sister-in-law's name Elaine?

LADY P. We did not even know that John was married. We do not meet often.

SIR PETER. We would surely have heard if . . .

LADY P. Why? John is quite capable of doing anything he has a mind to without consulting the family.

SIR PETER (*reminiscently*). A headstrong man. I remember him as a lad. We were at a grammar school together. We had a foolish game of daring each other to do ridiculously dangerous things.

MICKY. I know—"dags."

SIR PETER. I believe "dags" was what we called it. Curtis was in the habit of doing anything he was—er—dagged to do without a moment's hesitation. I recollect that someone dagged him to climb over and walk along the outside of the chapel gallery during evening prayers. He did so, and nearly killed several youths who were kneeling immediately below, by falling upon them during the general Confession.

LADY P. That would be John all over.

SIR PETER (*with unctuous humour*). In more senses than one. I have a small scar (*touches his head just above the ear*)—yet.

MICKY (*very suddenly*). No! What a mug I am! This Johnny can't be your brother. He's the big cheap grocer chap. You know—Curtis's Coffee Essence.

LADY P. (*resignedly*). Curtis's Coffee Essence is my brother.

MICKY (*vastly impressed*). Whew! What a chap! Really, I mean no offence, Lady Phil, but one can't help respecting a chap who gets on in the world. I thought you could only succeed in trade by being born to it—you know—must be somebody's son—Snoots and Son, or Sniffs and Son, and that hereditary principle we all dislike so. But brains will tell, you see. He must be worth pots of money.

LADY P. Money can be bought too dearly.

MICKY. I'm surprised to hear you say that, Lady Phil! I thought you were eminently sensible.

LADY P. I may be sensible, but I do not like to see my family name displayed on large hoardings over a crude representation of the Sultan of Turkey, the Shah, and the late Queen Victoria, smacking their lips over immense cups of my brother's concoction.

MICKY (*appreciatively*). It's a jolly good advert, that.

(GERALD FELLOWES is seen passing along verandah at back.)

SIR PETER. Er—is not that Mister Fellowes now passing the window?

MICKY (*twisting round*). Yes, that's him. He's waiting about for Elaine—I told you. Hi, Gerry! Giraldo!

(GERALD passes out of sight without hearing.)

MICKY. Hi, you ass! (*Jumps down from table.*) I'll hike him in. Wait a moment. (*Dashes off after GERALD, calling*) Hi, Gerry.

LADY P. (*looking at SIR PETER*). Well, what do you say to this?

SIR PETER. It may not be . . .

LADY P. Don't talk nonsense. Of course it's John. Did you ever know an unpleasant surprise that wasn't?

SIR PETER. John is unmarried.

LADY P. How do we know? Is there any ridiculous thing that John is not capable of doing? I suppose she's some barmaid . . .

SIR PETER. If she is—I think John could be depended upon to have excellent taste in barmaids.

LADY P. What do you mean? Hsh, here's Micky!

(MICKY returns, dragging GERALD into room and presenting him. GERALD is a graceful, well-bred young man of twenty-five, tall, slender, and youthful in appearance.)

MICKY. Here you are. Now, be polite. You remember Lady Phil?

GERALD (*bowing over her hand*). If Lady Philox remembers me half as well, I shall feel flattered. (*Crossing and shaking hands with SIR PETER*) Sir Peter, I am sure, does not remember me at all.

SIR PETER. My dear Mister Fellowes, I remember you perfectly.

MICKY. Of course you do, Pete. We've been gassing about you no end, Gerry.

GERALD (*standing on hearthrug*). I hope you found something nice to say about me.

MICKY. Rather! Hasn't she turned up yet?

GERALD (*after a moment's disconcertion*). Spending a quiet fortnight down here before the holidays, Sir Peter?

SIR PETER. That is our intention. Lady Philox selected this as an out-of-the-way spot.

GERALD. And the first people to greet you are Michael and myself ?
Hard luck !

MICKY. What a chap you are, Gerry ! Lady Phil was just saying how glad she was to find someone to talk to ; weren't you, Lady Phil ?

SIR PETER (*ignoring MICKY*). Are you working on anything now, Mister Fellowes, or do you rest on your laurels ?

GERALD (*pleased*). Well, I—I have hardly won my laurels yet, Sir Peter. Of course, several people have been very nice and encouraging about my first attempts—all of them good people, too—but—well—my volumes don't sell very well, you know.

LADY P. (*with great partiality*). My dear Gerald, whether your books sell or not you must know that the intellectual minority are watching you with the utmost interest as the coming man in your own sphere.

GERALD (*expanding*). It's awfully nice of you to say that, Lady Phil. Of course, I'm anxious as anyone can be to do good work. Of course—to—I realise that the appreciation of the perceptive few—" *les ames bien nees*—"

MICKY (*breaking in and ruining the effect of the quotation*). Oh, it's no use trying to get him started talking about his poems, Lady Phil ; he won't—even to me ! Snubs me no end when I inquire politely how the rhymes are flowing.

(HENRI enters by door L.)

HENRI. Your rooms are quite ready now, Milady.

LADY P. (*rising*). Thank you. Will you send someone up to unpack my boxes ?

HENRI. Certainly, Milady. (*Goes out again.*)

SIR PETER (*rising*). I shall be extremely glad of a wash. We shall see you again, Mister Fellowes, during the afternoon ?

MICKY. Oh, you'll see no end of us during the next fortnight, don't you worry.

(SIR PETER is half-way across the room when the door opens, and JOHN CURTIS enters, his pipe unlit in his hand. He starts at seeing LADY P., and looks across at SIR PETER with obvious annoyance ; but he chokes it down and greets his sister amiably enough.)

CURTIS. How are you, Mary ? Mutual surprise, I suppose. How are you, Peter ?

SIR PETER (*offering his hand*). I am quite well, thank you, my dear John.

(CURTIS shakes his hand and relinquishes it again. There is a moment's awkward pause ; MICKY plunges into it.)

MICKY. Cuss a bit, old man! We're all friends here. When a man unexpectedly finds himself in the bosom of his family he's to be excused a little strong language.

LADY P. (*welcoming the diversion*). Micky, you are extremely impertinent.

(LADY P. goes out L. SIR PETER follows, smiling amiably at JOHN.)

MICKY (*proudly*). There—see how I cleared the air for you? You looked all anyhow.

CURTIS (*standing on hearthrug and lighting his pipe*). I was surprised, certainly. (*Puffs for a moment; then suddenly to GERALD, who has moved to the Chesterfield above fireplace*) Oh, I forgot! Mister Fellowes, Elaine would like you to run up and have a cup of tea with her if you've nothing better to do.

GERALD (*jumping up gladly*). Thanks, I should like to. I was afraid it was a bit warm for a walk.

CURTIS. She'll be coming out when it gets a bit cooler. She's got a slight headache—I advised her to stay indoors. You know where to find her—on the upper verandah outside our sitting-room. Up you go. She'll be glad of someone to talk to. I'm damn bad company when there's tea about.

(GERALD goes off L. CURTIS remains standing on the hearthrug studying the bowl of his pipe and evidently thinking hard. He is a broad, well-built little man, obviously possessed of great strength, both physical and of character. He is forty-eight years of age, and his well-shaped head is grizzled. He is clean shaven, and very well groomed, though he affects a rough-weather costume even in the height of the summer. He is kindly and courteous, though extremely ready to fight out any subject that he has once expressed an opinion on. After a moment he addresses a sharp query to MICKY, who has returned to his perch on the table.)

CURTIS. When did my sister arrive?

MICKY. About twenty minutes ago.

CURTIS. Here for long, do you know?

MICKY. Fortnight, she said. But that was before she knew you were here.

(CURTIS grunts and, turning, presses bell beside fireplace.)

MICKY (*opening conversation*). So you're the B.B.

CURTIS. Eh?

MICKY. I say, you're the B.B.

CURTIS (*without interest*). What's that?

MICKY. Bush-whacker Baronet.

CURTIS (*briefly*). Oh!

MICKY. I'd no idea. You aren't very chatty about it.

CURTIS (*without expression*). No.

MICKY. Well, you ought to be. Here I've been treating you with all the respect due to a Captiving of Industry, and all the while you're nothing but an absconding baronet.

CURTIS (*amused out of his abstraction by the phrase*). What's that? Absconding Baronet?

MICKY. That's it. You've deliberately covered up your ancient origin and shoved yourself in amongst the respectable traders as if you were one of themselves. You're one of the *nouveau riche*, you are, and I hope ye *vieux riche* jolly well snub you when they find you out. Look here, what's the use of my amusing you if you won't listen?

CURTIS. No use at all. (*Rings bell again and keeps his finger on it.*)

MICKY. Well, then, I'm going for a walk, and you can stay here and bore yourself for a bit.

(HENRI enters L.).

CURTIS. Ask Lady Philox to be good enough to come down and speak to me as soon as it is convenient to her, please.

HENRI. Yes, sir. (*Goes out again.*)

MICKY. That won't be very soon, if I know anything about sisters. Your only hope is that the prospect of having a row with you will prove too great a temptation.

CURTIS. You talk too much, young man; that's your only fault.

MICKY. Talk too much! I like that! You don't realise that talking is the only exercise I take.

(LADY PHILOX enters L., *without her hat or bag.*)

MICKY. Here we are! Bye-bye—I suppose I mustn't stay and take notes.

(MICKY goes off via inner room and verandah. LADY PHILOX crosses and sits in Chesterfield above fire.)

LADY P. (*evenly*). Well, John? Do you go, or do we?

CURTIS. H'm. That's the question I was going to put to you.

LADY P. (*with a gleam of triumph*). I think I asked it first.

CURTIS (*emphatically*). I don't intend to leave.

LADY P. Then there is no more to be said.

CURTIS. I am sorry to turn you out, but we . . .

LADY P. We are not going to be turned out.

CURTIS. Then why did you put the alternative to me?

LADY P. If it comes to that, why did you propose putting it to me if you were determined to remain?

CURTIS (*laughing*). Good. That's fair. We're a pair of bluffers.

So we both stay, eh? And row, I suppose.

LADY P. I see no occasion why we should row—as you express it.

CURTIS. No, but I dare say you'll make one.

(SIR PETER enters L., *beaming and rubbing his hands together.*)

SIR PETER. Beautiful place—simply beautiful! Sun positively streaming in at our windows. Er—the room doesn't exactly face south, my dear, but it catches the afternoon sun over the hills most beautifully. (*Sitting beside his wife and looking very genial and brotherly.*) Well, my dear John, surprised to see us, eh? You remember Nelly? She's married.

CURTIS (*brusquely*). I know. I read my papers.

SIR PETER. I thought it might have slipped your notice.

CURTIS. Because I didn't send a cheque, eh?

SIR PETER (*waving his hand with engaging candour*). Well—your silence *was* my reason for doubting that you knew. You were very fond of Nelly, you remember? Your only niece. You might have sent her some little token. It would have been kind.

CURTIS (*explosively*). It would have been kind to have sent someone to knock that old rip Orchardson on the head before he married her.

LADY P. (*shocked*). My dear John! Nelly is devoted to Lord Orchardson.

CURTIS. Don't talk nonsense, Mary. A girl of twenty devoted to a man three times her age!

SIR PETER (*with winning good humour*). No, no, no—not three times her age, my dear John. Two—er—and a half times, perhaps—and a year or two over . . .

CURTIS. Don't be an ass, Peter. I know Orchardson. Mary advised the child into marrying him. You're not going to tell me . . .

LADY P. I certainly advised her not to marry young Vickary. He was quite impossible. I suppose you are referring to him.

CURTIS. I never heard of young Vickary. Was Nelly in love with him?

LADY P. Certainly not. He was quite impossible, even if she was. We haven't all your profound faith in love as a guide to matrimony.

CURTIS. I haven't any "profound faith." I don't say a girl should marry every man she falls in love with, because I'm not in favour of polygamy. But I do say she ought not to marry a man she isn't in love with. It's against Nature.

LADY P. If you are going to discuss Nature, John, I shall leave the room. You know I dislike the subject.

SIR PETER (*pleasantly*). After all, my dear John, affection and a certain reasonable regard for the comforts of money and—er—position are not inimical to each other. A—er—blend of the two, each in its proper proportion, is the ideal motive for an alliance. I am not one to underrate affection. It should—and often does—play a most important part in the selection of a—er—mate. But the world is so complex a place that anyone acting upon a single motive will generally find several other motives for regretting it.

CURTIS. I don't agree with you, Peter. Love's love, and a bargain's a bargain. There's no mixing the two.

LADY P. (*angry at being out of the argument*). If you would mind your own business . . .

SIR PETER (*still pleasantly*). Tsh, tsh, tsh, my dear Mary—John is Quixotic. An idealist—like so many business men. I like to see it ; I like to see it. But (*clearing his throat with an air of one opening a friendly argument in the Socratic manner*)—you are extremely wealthy, I believe, my dear John ?

CURTIS. Thanks to myself.

SIR PETER (*amiably*). Yes, yes—thanks to yourself. And you are married, I believe ?

CURTIS (*obstinately*). No, I'm not.

SIR PETER (*amazed*). You're not ?

CURTIS. No.

LADY P. (*coldly*). We heard from Micky Seelby . . .

CURTIS. About Elaine ? Well . . .

LADY P. I think we should be the ones to say "well."

CURTIS. Say it if you like.

LADY P. Then this woman you have here . . . And you have the effrontery to tell *me*, your sister.

CURTIS. Why shouldn't I tell you ?

LADY P. You might have some sense of decency.

SIR PETER. Surely you are joking ?

CURTIS. Why should I be joking ?

SIR PETER. Oh, to—to annoy Mary.

CURTIS. Well, I'm not.

SIR PETER. You are not married to—er—this woman ?

CURTIS. No.

LADY P. She is not married to anyone else, I hope ?

CURTIS. No, she's not, and she never has been.

SIR PETER (*feebly*). But I don't understand !

CURTIS. Oh yes, you do, Peter. Just because I don't want to win a wife by virtue of my money am I to live the life of a monk ? You don't object to a marriage of convenience ; well, this is that without the damned hypocrisy of a ceremony. It's a confessed bargain—not a cloaked one. I give Elaine a good income—which she needs, poor girl—and if ever it stops she'll leave me.

LADY P. I think I am as broad-minded as can be expected of a clergyman's wife, and I quite see that—men being—well—no more than men . . . such a menage may be over-looked provided it is kept in its own sphere—Maida Vale or West Hampstead. But really you shouldn't bring this woman here where she may meet your friends.

CURTIS. I'm not a man for friends.

SIR PETER. Well, your sister, then.

CURTIS (*belligerently*). Why shouldn't she meet my sister ?

LADY P. Really, John!

CURTIS. I'm not ashamed of Elaine. She's of as good a family as yours, she's well brought up, and she's a damn sight more agreeable.

LADY P. (*with abstruse sarcasm*). So I should judge.

SIR PETER (*oil on troubled waters*). Then, my dear John, if the lady is all these things, why do you not marry her?

LADY P. (*shocked*). Peter!

CURTIS. I'll tell you why I don't. It's because—rightly or wrongly—I regard marriage as a lifelong agreement.

SIR PETER. Certainly.

CURTIS. In a case of a love match, well and good. In the case of a bargain—an affair into which financial considerations enter—there should be a chance for either party to back out when they wish to. Elaine threw herself at me for my money—poor girl. I liked her. I still do. She's a damn good sort—and she's not mercenary, either.

LADY P. (*smiling sarcastically*). No?

CURTIS. No! To throw yourself at money when you haven't got a penny isn't mercenary—it's human nature. It's throwing yourself at money when you've already got enough to live on that I object to.

(*There is a moment's pause, during which CURTIS glares fiercely over his pipe, and the other two consider.*)

SIR PETER. My dear John, if you are satisfied with your way of life I will not attempt to argue with you on the subject. But I must say that I think you might not blurt it out so shamelessly.

CURTIS. Why shouldn't I? I'm not ashamed of my views, and I'm not ashamed of Elaine.

SIR PETER. That is not the point. The point is, that by telling us you place us in a very awkward position. After having learned the facts from you—as we have done—our duty to society makes it incumbent upon us not to—not to recognise this woman—er—unless we recognise her as your wife. And—if we remain here—not to recognise her will be extremely difficult.

CURTIS (*scornfully*). P'ff. If I hadn't told you, you'd have found out. At least Mary would have.

LADY P. I'm sure I would.

SIR PETER. That would have been quite a different matter. So long as you preserved the—er—deception well enough to give us an excuse for being deceived we need not have shown that we knew, and—if you had introduced the—er—er—*her* as your wife we should have been bound to accept her as such, which would have saved such a lot of unpleasantness.

CURTIS (*with humour*). I'll introduce her to you as my wife, if you like.

LADY P. John, you wouldn't dare!

CURTIS (*turning*). What?

SIR PETER (*anxiously*). Tsh, tsh, tsh, my dear Mary! Of course, John must introduce the person as his wife wherever he goes.

CURTIS (*obstinately*). No, I "mustn't"—and I don't. I'm not in the habit of telling lies or making pretences. I introduce Elaine—when I introduce her to anyone—by name, and they can think what they like.

SIR PETER (*throwing up his hands in mild despair*). Oh, my dear John, what an impossible fellow you are! Surely you must see that—if your life is arranged on—er—unconventional lines, your consideration for others should make you hide the fact. Shame is nothing to be ashamed of; it is merely a duty to Society.

CURTIS. I neither hide the fact nor parade it.

SIR PETER. No, no—I'm aware that you don't, but an unusual state of affairs may be said to almost parade itself. That, indeed, is the worst of—er—unconventionality; it is so noticeable. That is why you really must introduce this woman to us as your wife.

LADY P. Indeed, you must do nothing of the kind, John.

SIR PETER. My dear, if John does not, we cannot possibly remain here.

LADY P. (*with her brother's obstinacy*). We are going to remain here.

(*Through the French windows ELAINE can be seen coming along the verandah from L. John, from his position on the hearth-rug, sees her first.*)

CURTIS (*grimly humorous*). Well, here comes the lady. Make up your minds; how shall she be presented?

SIR PETER (*plaintively*). My dear John, do not *make* trouble.

(*ELAINE, having crossed inner room, enters through folding doors C. and pauses on seeing strangers. SIR PETER rises nervously, and LADY P. turns without rising. CURTIS clears his throat and waits cruelly before he speaks.*)

CURTIS (*weighing his words*). Elaine, my dear, let me introduce you to my sister, Lady Philox. Mary—this is Elaine. Peter—my wife. (*Dryly*) Well, both satisfied?

(*LADY P. rises, and with a bow which she regrets as soon as bestowed passes ELAINE and goes into inner room. SIR PETER approaches ELAINE and holds out his hand. She gives him hers.*)

SIR PETER. I'm very pleased to meet you. We—er (*with a little confiding laugh*)—er—didn't know that John was married—but—John was never one to *talk* (*wipes his brow and looks at John anxiously*)—and, of course, we know it now,

don't we? Er—better late than never—er. (*Pauses for breath.*) We shall see you again my—er—at—that is—we shall see you again.

(SIR PETER goes into the inner room and looks around for his wife, who is out of sight. ELAINE, who has started very slightly at the introduction now draws out chair above table and sits resting her arms on table. She is a tall, well-bred woman of twenty-eight or nine, something between pretty and handsome—certainly fascinating. She is dressed in perfect taste. Her manner is pleasant, but reserved, and she speaks quietly as a rule. Just now she is a little pale. CURTIS looks at her keenly.)

CURTIS. What's the matter?

ELAINE. Nothing. (*Pauses.*) You never introduced me as your wife before.

CURTIS. Do you mind?

ELAINE (*smiling slightly*). No. It took me by surprise, that's all.

And—I never expected to meet any of your family.

CURTIS (*kindly*). I'm sorry. (*After a pause*) Had tea?

ELAINE. Yes.

CURTIS. Going for a walk?

ELAINE (*willingly*). Do you want me to stay in for anything?

CURTIS. No, no. Go for a walk, by all means. Young Fellowes?

(ELAINE *nods*.) I'm glad we met him here. He's good company for you, isn't he? I'm not much good at being amusing. I think I'll go out for a bit, too.

ELAINE. Would you rather I came with you?

CURTIS. Good Lord, no, child! I'm not quite so selfish as that. I don't want to walk you off your feet and bore you to death at the same time.

ELAINE. You don't bore me to death.

CURTIS. Fiddlesticks, my dear! It's very nice of you, but you know you'd rather go with young Fellowes. I don't blame you. So would I if I were an intelligent young lady instead of a sordid old money-grubber. (*Comes around and pats her tenderly on shoulder.*) I'm sorry I upset you just now.

ELAINE (*smiling up at him*). It's all right.

CURTIS. I'm a thoughtless old duffer; that's what's the matter with me. Well, I'll go and get my stick.

(GERALD enters inner room through French windows as CURTIS is going off. ELAINE rises and goes to fireplace. In the inner room GERALD pauses to speak to someone out of sight.)

GERALD. Getting settled down? I suppose you're tired after your journey?

SIR PETER (*answering him from out of sight*). It did not seem so very long; we had lunch on the train.

GERALD. I can recommend tea on the verandah. (*Comes through doors c. into room.*) Hullo! I thought you'd have your hat on. Aren't you coming for a walk?

ELAINE (*turning*). Yes. I'll . . .

(*LOUISE, a middle-aged French maid, enters L. with hat, gloves, and parasol.*)

LOUISE. Madame will be going out? M'sieu told me to bring down madame's hat.

ELAINE. Thank you. (*Puts on hat before glass over fireplace.*)

GERALD. He seems rather anxious to pack you off.

ELAINE. I was thinking how considerate it was of him. Who were you speaking to in the other room?

GERALD. Sir Peter Philox and Lady Phil. They've just arrived. Have you met them?

ELAINE. Yes. (*After a pause, during which the hat is carefully adjusted*) Lady Philox is John's sister.

GERALD (*surprised*). Is she? I never knew that. She's your sister-in-law, then?

ELAINE (*taking gloves from LOUISE*). Shall we be starting? (*Passes him and gets to door c., then turns back with an idea.*) Oh, Louise—I will wear the *crêpe-de-Chine* at dinner.

GERALD. Hullo! Want to impress her ladyship?

ELAINE. Perhaps. Come along.

(*They go out together through inner room.*)

END OF SCENE I.

SCENE 2

A GRASSY LEDGE ABOVE THE SEA

On the right the cliff towers into the sky. The ledge breaks off abruptly at back and left. The sky is beyond—a curving wall of blue. Far below, the beat of the sea on the shore can be heard intermittently. It is between six and seven o'clock in the evening, and the shadows are lengthening. ELAINE is sitting with her back to the cliff looking off over the sea to L. The sinking sun shines on her face. Her hat is off and lies beside her with her gloves and parasol. Near her GERALD lies flat on his back on the grass with his head on his hands, declaiming Shakespeare into the heavens.

GERALD. "Let us not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters where it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no . . ." (*suddenly becoming self-conscious and breaking off*).

Do I bore you?

ELAINE. You know you don't

GERALD. I hope I don't.

ELAINE. Please go on.

GERALD. You really want me to? (*She makes no reply.*) Where was I?

ELAINE. At the last verse.

GERALD (*greatly hurt*). No, I wasn't. But I'll cut to the last verse if you like—if you want me to get through quickly?

ELAINE. Go on from where you left off.

GERALD (*resuming*). "Oh no . . ." (*breaks off again*). You will stop me if I bore you, won't you?

(*She disdains to reply.*)

GERALD. "... It is an ever fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, altho' his height be taken."
(*With more expression as he warms to his words.*)

"Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out, ev'n to the edge of doom:
If this be error, and on me be proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

Splendid, isn't it?

ELAINE. Yes. (*Hesitatingly*) Shakespeare?

GERALD (*approvingly*). Yes. (*Then, kindly*) I love you to be right about that sort of thing.

ELAINE (*smiling*). Don't you mean you hate me to be wrong?

GERALD. It's the same thing. (*There is a pause.*) "That changes where it alteration finds . . ." But love does change even where it no alteration finds. (*And he sits up and shakes his head sadly.*)

ELAINE. Does it?

GERALD (*looking at her and changing his mind emphatically*). No—it doesn't; you know it doesn't—not real love.

ELAINE (*laughing off the impending atmosphere of sentiment*). Really, I don't care whether it does or doesn't—to-day. I'm far too happy up here.

GERALD. And ten minutes ago I was thinking you looked sad.

ELAINE. My headache, perhaps.

GERALD. Isn't it any better?

ELAINE (*shaking her head experimentally*). I think it's gone.
(*Nodding towards the sinking sun*) Do look.

(GERALD rolls over, and resting on his elbows also looks off L.)

GERALD. Yes, it's gorgeous, isn't it?

ELAINE. Not a cloud, not a sail, not even a bird. Nothing but sea and sunlight and sky.

GERALD (*turning back and looking at her with admiration*). And nothing wanted—at least in that direction.

ELAINE (*meeting his admiration with a smile*). Why, what's lacking about me?

GERALD (*enthusiastically*). There's nothing lacking about you. You're perfect.

ELAINE (*pleased, but parrying his earnestness with a laughing bow*). Thank you.

GERALD. I mean it. You look simply gorgeous. I never saw anyone look so beautiful as you do now with the sunlight on your face.

(*She looks away. There is a pause.*)

GERALD. You don't mind my saying that?

ELAINE. Mind? No.

GERALD. You know I don't mean anything.

ELAINE (*her eyebrows raised whimsically*). Don't mean anything?

GERALD (*brimming with explanation*). No—I don't mean that, you know I don't. I mean—of course I mean what I say, but what I mean is—I don't mean anything—impertinent.

ELAINE. Thank you very much.

GERALD. Oh, I say, please don't make fun of me.

ELAINE (*relenting and holding out her hand, which he takes in his*). I'm not making fun of you—only the way you enthuse.

GERALD (*encouraged*). Yes, I know. After all, why shouldn't you make fun of me? Between friends—between such good friends—surely a little chaff can't do much harm. And we are friends, aren't we? (*She does not deny it.*) The funny part of it is, that I'm not a bit enthusiastic really. But somehow—up here—it's so . . .

(*Her hand is still in his; he raises it and kisses it—then he begins to feel embarrassed and, rising, goes to edge of ledge at back and looks down. ELAINE turns, sees him, and speaks quickly.*)

ELAINE. Oh, please, don't go so near the edge.

GERALD. I'm quite safe.

ELAINE. You might . . .

GERALD (*asserting a man's right to take risks without being interfered with*). There's Curtis going along the path.

ELAINE. You make me go all cold. Please come back.

GERALD (*complying slowly*) . . . Tramping along with his heavy boots. (*Returning and sitting down beside her.*) I suppose he's not such a bad chap when you know him.

ELAINE. He's always been very kind to me.

GERALD (*scornfully*). Yes, I daresay. But a woman like you wants something more than kindness. How can he possibly understand you with his money-grubbing ideas?

ELAINE (*pitiably*). Poor John!

GERALD (*taking up her words*). Poor John? I like that. He has everything on earth a man can want. Oh, the curse of wealth! Nothing but money could have made you the wife of a man like that.

ELAINE. Nothing but the lack of money is the more truthful way of putting it. Instead of blaming John's money for buying me, you should blame my poverty for putting me up for sale.

GERALD (*with demonstrative disgust*). Don't! Don't let's talk about it. I hate to think of you so.

ELAINE. And yet we generally manage to get on to the subject, don't we?

GERALD. Yes. It's so awful, it's—omnipresent. (*Explosively*) Good God! what are we to expect from the next generation when the women of this can say without a shudder, "I married for money, not love"? (*ELAINE does not answer. He speaks more quietly.*) Elaine . . .

ELAINE. Yes?

GERALD. Did you never meet anyone you could care for?

(*ELAINE shakes her head vaguely. He rolls over and looks out towards the setting sun once more.*)

GERALD. How quickly the sun goes down. You can almost see it sinking towards the sea.

ELAINE. How old are you?

GERALD. Twenty-five. Why do you want to know?

ELAINE. Oh, I was just wondering. I should have thought you were more.

GERALD (*surprised and delighted*). Would you really? I'm glad. It isn't many people notice that I look older than I am. But you see my mind more than my outward appearance, and really—I think I can say without vanity—that I'm a great deal more than twenty-five in my mind. You see—I've been through experiences—and things—that make a man feel—older than those around him.

ELAINE (*mystified*). What sort of experiences?

GERALD. Oh—well—it's hard to pin one down and describe it; but I had some nasty disappointments in human nature while I was at Oxford—things like that age a man.

ELAINE. I'm a lot older than you.

GERALD. No, you're not.

ELAINE. Four years.

GERALD. That's nothing. You don't look it.

ELAINE (*slowly*). Not now. But in ten years' time I shall be getting old. (*Pauses and looks at him.*) And you will be younger than you are now.

GERALD. What do you mean by that?

ELAINE (*not without appreciation of her own epigram*). Now, you've just found out that you are old. In ten years' time you'll be just finding out that you're young.

GERALD. I thought you said that I looked more than my age.

ELAINE. Exactly.

GERALD. Well, anyway, I don't call a woman old at forty.

ELAINE. I shan't be forty. I shall only be thirty-nine.

(*There is another pause.*)

GERALD. Elaine.

ELAINE. Yes?

GERALD. Did I ever tell you about someone I once thought I was very fond of?

ELAINE. No, I don't think so.

GERALD. No. (*Musingly*) It's funny. I've often felt I wanted to tell you about her, and then—somehow—I haven't.

ELAINE (*with a twinkle*). Perhaps we have been too busy discussing John. You know I feel just a little wicked for the way we've spoken about John behind his back.

GERALD. I don't see why you should. (*Returning to his topic*) I think it's that I've been afraid it would bore you to hear about her. And yet I don't suppose it would. You're not easily bored.

ELAINE. What became of her?

GERALD. She behaved very badly to me.

ELAINE. Oh? What did she do?

GERALD. She married someone else. I was fearfully cut up about it.

ELAINE. Poor boy. But you got over it.

GERALD. Oh yes—but I was awfully young then.

ELAINE (*smiling*). Why, how long ago was it?

GERALD. Nearly two years. I wouldn't get over a thing like that so easily now; though I didn't get over that so easily either.

ELAINE. Tell me about her.

GERALD. What a dear you are! You're interested in anything. (*Pauses then starts*) Of course, I was awfully young when I first met her—not much more than a boy. I don't suppose I was really in love, but I thought I was awfully gone on her. Her name was Violet; I called her Lurline.

ELAINE. Why?

GERALD. Well—it's rather a long story. I'll begin at the beginning
—if it won't bore you. Stop me if it does, won't you?

ELAINE (*nodding*). Yes.

GERALD. Well—she . . .

(THE CURTAIN DESCENDS.)

ACT II

SCENE

THE GARDEN OF THE WESTMEATH HOTEL, TWO HOURS LATER

The hotel with its verandah is L. Steps lead up to the verandah from the lawn and three French windows open from the verandah into the dining-room. There are large trees R. and at back, making the outline of the scene in those directions vague and indistinct with their shadows. There is one large tree R.C. and under it a comfortable garden wicker chair, and a little white enamelled table with a book on it. From a branch of the tree—immediately above the chair—hangs a large Chinese lantern. Close to the chair R.C. are two other small chairs, and another faces it from L.C. A very small chair is below it R. These, with a few cushions on the grass, form a rough semicircle around the middle of the stage.

The dusk is fading into night, and the moon is rising. The light from the dining-room streams out across the grass and blends with the moonbeams.

As the curtain rises HENRI can be seen in the dining-room moving about serving coffee. MICKY comes through the middle window and runs down steps to lawn where, grabbing one cushion from the grass and another from a chair he throws them into the large chair and sits on them, watching the house for other comers.

A moment passes, and then GERALD strolls out from amongst the trees R. and crosses in front of chairs, looking anxiously towards windows. As he reaches C., MICKY hails him.

MICKY. Woa, Gerry.

GERALD (*turning and seeing him*). Hulloo. All alone?

MICKY (*in an aggrieved tone*). Considering that you got up and left me to finish by myself, I suppose I am. Stop wandering about like a lost soul and come and be talked to.

GERALD (*sitting in chair L.C. facing MICKY*). I see you've taken the best chair.

MICKY. I'm hanging on to it for Elaine in case she'll honour us by sitting out here for a bit.

GERALD (*jumping up restlessly after a moment's pause*). Well—I think I'll go for a stroll.

MICKY. What a chap you are, Gerry! Give the girl a minute.

GERALD. Look here, Michael, I don't like your speaking so familiarly of Mrs. Curtis. It isn't nice for a married woman to be referred to as "the girl." (*Walks up stage and back again, watching windows with increasing impatience.*) What on earth is the matter with her? They'd finished dinner, hadn't they?

MICKY. Yep. Chatting to sister Mary, perhaps.

GERALD (*sitting down again*). Confounded nuisance Sir Peter and Lady Phil coming down here and ousting us from their table.

MICKY. Yes, we were a comfy little quartette, weren't we? Silly mania these hotel managers have for ramming relations down each other's throats. I can't say I fancy you all to myself. You did nothing but look over my head at Elaine all through dinner.

GERALD. Well, you were talking over your shoulder to them all the time.

MICKY (*patiently*). My dear Gerry, I must talk to someone. (*Musically*) Old Curtis didn't look overjoyed to see Pete and Lady Phil in our places, did he? It struck me the old girl looked a bit disgruntled, too.

GERALD. You could only see her back.

MICKY. Yes—but she's got most expressive ears. She scarcely spoke to Elaine—it struck me she looked a bit afraid of her. Did you notice it?

GERALD (*irritably*). Who looked afraid of whom?

MICKY. Elaine looked afraid of Lady Phil. Didn't you notice it?

GERALD (*shortly*). No.

MICKY. I did. I wonder what's wrong. Old Pete was all there, though. See him doing the polite? Awfully impressed. I don't wonder—she looked stunning in that dress. I never saw her look so alluring. Lucky devil old Curtis, eh? Nothing like trade, you know, Gerry. If I'd got the brains I'd invent a boot polish to-morrow. Elaine's jolly lucky to have got hold of a man like that instead of a silly ass like you or me.

GERALD (*scornfully*). Lucky! Do you think she's happy with him?

MICKY. Well, she ought to be. She looks contented enough.

GERALD (*with gentle superiority*). I'm afraid you don't understand women, Micky, or you wouldn't say that because a woman looks contented she is happy. She may have all she wants to eat and plenty of dresses and hats—but you do not think that Curtis appreciates her?

MICKY (*with conviction*). I'm jolly well sure he does. See the way he picked out the only decent peach for her at dinner?

GERALD (*with a show of amused tolerance*). Micky, you are incorrigible. I mean—does he appreciate her soul?

MICKY (*hopefully*). Very likely.

GERALD (*earnestly*). No, Micky, he *doesn't*. She is *not* happy. I see it every time I talk to her. She—*understands*—better than a woman who is really contented can do. She . . . When I told her about Lurline . . .

MICKY (*sitting up attentively*). Oh, you've told her about Lurline, have you?

GERALD (*evasively*). I—mentioned her apropos of something or other. You can talk to Elaine about anything.

MICKY. Was she interested?

GERALD (*enthusiastically*). She's always interested . . .

MICKY. In you or in the story?

GERALD. Micky!

MICKY (*with unusual seriousness*). Look here, Gerald, old man, don't you get the idea into your head that Elaine is not happy with old Curtis. She is. And if she isn't she ought to be. He's rough and tough, I know; but a man who can screw his brain down to getting what he wants out of the world the way *he* can is worth fifty of us as a husband. He's considerate and good-natured, and he doesn't bother her—as I bet you do—with the best intentions in the world—every time you talk to her for half an hour. He's a humorous old cuss, too. Remember when you were gassing about the Elgin Marbles and he . . .

GERALD (*irritated beyond endurance*). Oh, do shut up, Micky. It's bad enough to have a miserable joke like that got off at one's expense once without hearing it immortalised by every idiot of one's acquaintance.

MICKY. You're not very polite, are you?

GERALD. I'm sorry. I'm a bit irritable, I know. But—really—look at this gorgeous night—wasted! Isn't it a sin for anyone to sit indoors—eating—on a night like this? Look at the moon.

MICKY. Very nice moon, but it'll keep till she comes out.

GERALD (*disgusted*). "It'll keep till she comes out." Of all the soulless remarks!

MICKY (*watching him thoughtfully*). What's the matter with you? You're worse than usual to-night. (*With an idea.*) I say . . .

GERALD. Well?

MICKY (*chattily*). What happened when you told Elaine about the other girl?

GERALD (*furiously angry*). You're damned impertinent. What do you mean?

MICKY (*seriously*). Gerry, I've no wish to be inquisitive, but it's like this—I brought you down here and I'm responsible for you. I shall get into no end of trouble with Lady Phil and all the other old ladies who adore you if I let you get mixed up in a divorce case, or a severe spanking, or anything unpleasant of that sort while you are under my wing.

GERALD (*very angry*). If you'd use intelligible English . . .

MICKY (*holding up one finger*). Now, don't digress. You know perfectly well that you're sweet on Mrs. C. I don't blame you—I am myself. Don't be jealous. But I'm an idealist, I am. You're a blooming poet, and consequently you can't feel the beautifying influence of a lovely woman without wanting to tell her all about it.

GERALD. What reason have you for thinking that I'm—what you call "sweet" on Mrs. Curtis?

MICKY (*winking*). Oh, a sort of intuition. I'll show you how it works. (*Turning, and in a surprised tone*) Hullo, here she is!

GERALD (*jumping up eagerly and going to the foot of the steps*). At last, come along!

(*LADY PHILOX emerges from dining-room. GERALD is intensely disappointed and turns to glare at MICKY, who explodes with laughter at the success of his trick.*)

LADY P. (*coming down the steps with the aid of GERALD'S outstretched hand*). Thank you, Gerald. Were you waiting for us? How nice of you.

(*SIR PETER follows her down steps and they both approach the ring of chairs. MICKY rises.*)

SIR PETER. So you sit out in the garden after dinner? How very nice.

(*LADY P. has taken the small chair C. SIR PETER sits in the one between her and the large chair under the tree.*)

GERALD. Yes, sometimes. . . . As a matter of fact, I was just thinking of going for a stroll.

LADY P. (*offended*). Please don't let me prevent you.

MICKY. I'll come too, Gerry.

GERALD (*apologetically to LADY P.*). There's nothing I can get you?

LADY P. (*coldly*). No, thank you, Gerald.

MICKY. Come on. (*He takes GERALD'S arm and they go off together through the trees R.*)

(*LADY P. and SIR PETER do not speak for some seconds. LADY P. sits very upright in her chair. SIR PETER, after trying vainly to lean back, and nearly tipping up his chair, notices the cushions in the larger one, and transfers himself to that. LADY P. opens the conversation abruptly.*)

LADY P. Well, did you ever see anything like it?

SIR PETER (*comfortably*). Like what, my dear?

LADY P. Like what? Like that woman's dress at dinner.

SIR PETER. Why, what was the matter with it?

LADY P. (*acidly*). What was the matter with it? Did you ever see *me* in a dress like that?

SIR PETER (*agreeably*). No, but dresses vary so. What suits one person does not suit another.

LADY P. (*sharply*). What do you mean by that?

SIR PETER. What could I mean by it? I'm afraid I don't remember very much about the dress in question. (*Dreamily*) I doubt if I could say, off-hand, of what material it was made, or to what—er—period you would assign it. It was very charming.

LADY P. Charming?

SIR PETER. It charmed the eye, so . . .

LADY P. I suppose you'll be saying that the woman herself is very charming next.

SIR PETER (*pleasantly*). Well . . .

LADY P. (*sarcastically*). And a lady!

SIR PETER (*with gentle courage*). I should say—if I were asked—that she was a lady—yes.

LADY P. I am glad you succeeded in forming so decided an opinion. I thought you seemed to be studying her rather closely at dinner.

SIR PETER (*remonstratingly*). My dear . . .

LADY P. Why, you never took your eyes off her. Neither did poor Gerald at the next table, while that fool of a brother of mine fussed over her as if she was a baby.

SIR PETER (*thoughtfully*). He is certainly very attentive to her. (*Pauses and then continues, still on the same train of thought*) After all, my dear Mary, isn't it as well that she is a lady?

LADY P. (*apprehensively*). Why?

SIR PETER. Well—if John were to modify his views, and marry her . . .

LADY P. (*shocked*). Peter, I'm surprised at you.

SIR PETER. My dear Mary . . .

LADY P. The idea is disgusting.

SIR PETER (*shaking his head amiably*). I'm afraid I do not follow your views on morality, my dear. In their way they seem as odd to me as John's.

LADY P. I think most people would share them with me.

SIR PETER (*agreeably*). Very likely, very likely.

(MICKY and GERALD can be heard approaching through the tress up R.)

LADY P. Who's that?

SIR PETER (*craning round*). Mister Fellowes and Mister Seelby.

LADY P. H'm. I suppose he is hanging around after the charming lady you would like to make my sister-in-law. Perhaps you'll think it would be nice if she were to marry *him* next.

SIR PETER. Tsh, tsh, tsh!

(MICKY and GERALD have strolled on again up R. ELAINE now appears in middle window wearing a very beautiful,

but simple, evening dress and some jewellery. GERALD goes quickly to the foot of the steps and holds out his hand.)

GERALD. I thought you were never coming.

ELAINE (*letting him help her down the steps*). Have I been so long?

MICKY (*dashing at SIR PETER and tipping him out of the large chair*).

Come on, Pete. Out of that chair. It's reserved for Elaine.

SIR PETER (*good-naturedly*). You are a great champion of Mrs. Curtis's, Mister Seelby.

(MICKY *pats up cushions*. SIR PETER *stands watching him*.)

LADY P. *sits very upright, looking straight ahead of her.*

GERALD *has led ELAINE down L. away from the others close to the verandah. He still holds her hand, and speaks in a low tone.*)

GERALD. You'll come for a walk?

ELAINE (*with forced lightness of manner*). No, I don't think I will to-night.

GERALD (*surprised and hurt*). Oh, why not?

ELAINE (*lamely*). I'm a little tired.

GERALD. You're not angry with me about this afternoon? I couldn't help kissing you. You looked so sweet—and when I told you about Lurline you—understood so well—that it seemed the most natural thing in the world to do. Please . . .

(CURTIS *comes through window carrying a lace scarf. They draw apart at the sound of his voice.*)

CURTIS (*coming down to her*). I've fetched your scarf-thing, dear. The evenings are still chill, and we can't have you catching cold, can we?

ELAINE. Thank you.

(CURTIS *puts the lace about her shoulders, GERALD moving disgustedly up stage as he does so. CURTIS and ELAINE then move together towards the chairs. LADY P. immediately rises. CURTIS notices it and speaks sharply.*)

CURTIS. Don't get up, Mary.

LADY P. (*icily*). I wish to go indoors.

CURTIS. No, you don't; sit down again. (*She gives him an angry glance, but he meets it squarely and speaks very peremptorily.*) Sit down.

(LADY P. *obeys in surprise. ELAINE takes the large chair which MICKY offers her. CURTIS sits L., next to him is LADY P., next to her SIR PETER, on his right ELAINE.*)

MICKY (*to ELAINE*). There you are. I've had no end of a fight to keep it for you. You do take a time chewing the cud.

Gerry's been waiting for you for hours. (*Draws up small chair and sits close to ELAINE'S feet.*)

(GERALD has returned to the group and is now settling himself on some cushions down c. CURTIS looks down at him kindly.)

CURTIS. Do you good, young man. Patient waiting exercises the mind. Half my best inspirations have come to me while I was waiting for Elaine to put on her hat.

MICKY. I can picture you leaning brainily against the hat-stand and murmuring . . . (*breaking off*). What sort of inspirations does one need for your business?

CURTIS (*with a touch of pompousness*). Useful ones.

LADY P. (*acidly*). Cheap advertisement seems to be your forte, John.

CURTIS. Cheap is as cheap turns out, Mary. D'you know the last thing I did before leaving Manchester was to sign a cheque for one million more sheets of our old thirty-two! (*Impressively*) One million more sheets at tuppence-farthing a sheet. Nine . . . (*Catches ELAINE'S eye and stops rather sheepishly, but adds with a twinkle in his eye*) All right, my dear.

SIR PETER (*finishing the sum dreamily*). Nine thousand three hundred and seventy-five pounds exactly. Dear me!

CURTIS (*laughing*). Careful, Peter! Elaine's got her eye on us! I'm not allowed to talk shop except at home.

SIR PETER (*laughing to ELAINE*). You keep him in order, eh?

ELAINE (*laughing back*). I try to.

SIR PETER. Isn't he rather—er—a handful?

ELAINE. Sometimes.

GERALD (*saving the conversation from becoming mere badinage*).

Don't you think something more—artistic—than your usual taste . . .

CURTIS (*turning on him*). What do you know about my usual taste?

GERALD. I am presuming that your posters are of your own selecting.

CURTIS (*dangerously*). Certainly they are. Well?

GERALD (*scornfully*). Well . . .

CURTIS (*polishing him off*). When I'm fishing for perch I use worms.

Does that mean that worms are my favourite dish? When I'm fishing for the custom of the working public I use Martin's lithos, but I don't hang them on my walls.

MICKY (*elated*). Oh, Gerry, what a smacking!

CURTIS (*tempering it with friendly patronage which makes GERALD squirm*). Not at all. Mister Fellowes is very young, and young people always talk a lot about taste. It took a good many smackings to knock the truth into me that the best possible taste is to give people what they want.

LADY P. Especially when you want their custom in return.

CURTIS (*ignoring the sarcasm*). Exactly.

MICKY. Most edifying. (*Then leaning back and nursing one knee as he gazes into the sky.*) Ripping night! There's your moon, Gerry—I told you it would keep. Something awfully softening about the moon, isn't there? Makes me think of Nelly. You don't mind my thinking about her, do you, Lady Phil? (*Sighs.*) Good old moon. Perhaps she's looking at it too. Where's she taken Orchardson to for the *voyage de triumph*, Pete?

SIR PETER. They are making a rather protracted tour of the Rhine, and the—er—Bavarian Highlands. Lord Orchardson is quite a guide to the—er—Fatherland. He speaks German perfectly.

MICKY (*savagely*). So he ought to; he's got false teeth.

GERALD. Michael!

LADY P. Micky, please do not speak of our son-in-law like that.

MICKY. Don't forget that I'm a rejected suitor, Lady Phil.

LADY P. Don't be ridiculous.

ELAINE (*entering the conversation nervously*). I think I used to know your daughter, Sir Peter.

SIR PETER (*amazed, but quickly recovering himself*). Good heavens!—er—I mean—you . . . (*Quite politely and encouragingly*) You used to know Nelly?

ELAINE. Yes. Wasn't she at Winborne House School, at Folkestone?

SIR PETER. To be sure she was.

ELAINE (*more at ease*). I thought I remembered the name. We were rather good friends—though of course I was several years her senior.

SIR PETER. Were you at Winborne House too?

ELAINE. Yes.

LADY P. (*exploding with indignation*). I was always opposed to sending Nelly to that school.

(*ELAINE retires into her shell again. CURTIS looks warningly, and SIR PETER pleadingly, at LADY P., who closes her mouth with a snap after her outburst. MICKY is still studying the sky. There is an awkward silence, which SIR PETER sees the necessity of breaking.*)

SIR PETER (*chattily*). The Walderoots are in town again, John.

CURTIS. The what?

SIR PETER. The Walderoots. Sergius Walderoot who wrote the book on Asiatic Russia.

CURTIS. Oh, good Lord! I thought you were telling me about some sort of wild beast, or plague, or something.

SIR PETER (*gently*). You used to know them. Amy Walderoot was a Waller. (*Pronounced to rhyme with Caller.*)

CURTIS (*dryly*). Was she really? It shows what a lot a man can get over to be able to forget a name like that.

SIR PETER. You are quite out of touch with your old set, John.

CURTIS. I haven't been in a London drawing-room three times in the last twenty years.

MICKY. Bless us! And yet you look civilised in a rough sort of way.

CURTIS. You go out to the new countries, my lad, if you want to know what civilisation means.

MICKY (*frankly*). I don't.

SIR PETER (*still pondering*). I suppose you don't remember the de Boins either, then?

CURTIS (*tersely*). No, I don't.

SIR PETER. Of course, twenty years is a long time, but I should have thought you'd have remembered the Walderoofs.

MICKY (*who has been watching ELAINE*). You're very quiet.

ELAINE. Am I?

CURTIS. Why don't you go for a walk with one of these youngsters, dear? It'll be better than sitting here and being bored by us old fogies. Mister Fellowes—take her for a walk.

GERALD (*jumping up with alacrity*). Thanks. I should like to.

CURTIS (*genially*). Of course you would. Off you go.

ELAINE (*rising doubtfully*). I'm a little tired.

GERALD. We won't go far.

ELAINE (*suddenly*). Won't you come too, Mister Seelby?

MICKY (*surprised*). What? Me? (*Jumping up.*) Rather! Come on, Gerry! (*Goes off R. with ELAINE, leaving GERALD to follow, which he does in a very bad humour.*)

CURTIS (*chuckling happily as he watches them off*). She knows how to manage youngsters, Peter. See the way she plays them off against each other? (*LADY P. snorts; he ignores it.*) It's a treat to see her with young people. I'm afraid she has rather a dull time of it with me most of the year. Poor Elaine. (*To LADY P.*) By the way, Mary—I—I'm putting this as a favour . . . (*In a more conciliatory tone than he has yet adopted*) If we are both staying here—and it seems that we are—I shall be very grateful if you'll refrain from showing that you know that there's anything unusual about Elaine's position—at least while she's about.

LADY P. (*sarcastically*). I thought you said you didn't mind *who* knew, or what people thought.

CURTIS (*determined not to be drawn into a quarrel*). Yes, yes, I know I did—and from my own point of view I don't. But I wasn't considering *her* when I said that. I'm such a selfish old duffer that I didn't realise that women—even the most sensible of them—have a sort of latent weakness for respectability, which I haven't got. You've hurt Elaine already by your rudeness. She hasn't said anything, but I can see that you have. Of

course, she knows now that you know the truth, but there's no need to rub it in. Really—you'll oblige me very much by not getting up and moving away every time she comes near you.

LADY P. (*unpleasantly*). Indeed? You don't appear to appreciate the possibility that *I* may have some sense of what is proper too. Some "latent weakness for respectability," as you call it.

CURTIS (*easily*). Oh yes, I daresay you have. But, after all, you haven't done anything to be uncomfortable about. If Elaine is doing something disgraceful in accepting an income from me without a licence from Mrs. Grundy—and she knows it, and is ashamed of it—surely she's the one whose feelings should be considered. We shouldn't throw stones at people in glass houses, you know.

SIR PETER (*curiously*). You didn't get sunstroke while you were in Australia, did you, John?

CURTIS (*surprised at the question*). Sunstroke? No. Why?

SIR PETER. No, no—I was merely wondering. You seem a little—odd—that is all.

CURTIS (*laughing*). Oh, I see. No, I'm not mad; but I've a habit of taking my ideas out of my own head as I go along, and not borrowing them second-hand from other people, so perhaps they may be a bit novel. Put me down as just a crank, Peter.

SIR PETER (*indulgently*). I'm afraid I have already done so, my dear John. But I have a certain partiality for cranks.

LADY P. (*rising*). Well, I haven't. So perhaps since your sensitive protégée is not here to be hurt at my departure I may be allowed to go indoors.

(*They rise politely as she goes up the steps and into hotel. SIR PETER then resumes his seat with a little worldly shake of the head.*)

SIR PETER. I'm not at all surprised at Mary's attitude, you know, John. The married woman has an instinctive aversion for the—er—the *hetaerae*. (*Chuckles gently over his Greekism.*) Doubtless she regards her as a sort of blackleg who enters the market on lower terms than herself.

CURTIS (*resuming his seat*). H'h. Well, I wish to goodness she wouldn't make Elaine uncomfortable. What good does it do her? And it's uncharitable!

SIR PETER. People engaged upon uncharitableness seldom consider their own personal ends, John. That is why women are more uncharitable than men. They are more unselfish.

CURTIS (*still on his previous grievance*). You must see for yourself that Elaine is a woman of refined feelings.

SIR PETER (*kindly*). Obviously.

CURTIS (*very gratefully*). You *do* see it? Thank you, Peter.

SIR PETER (*beaming with good nature*). Don't you think, John, that if—for her sake—you want her to be treated with the respect due to your wife you might as well marry her? It would be easier than saying to everyone you meet that you don't care who knows the truth, and then asking them not to show that they know it?

CURTIS (*on the defensive*). I suppose you think I'm a fool?

SIR PETER (*complacently*). My—ha—regard for your head is not as great as my regard for your heart.

CURTIS. Heart? Fiddlesticks! I haven't got a heart.

SIR PETER (*persuasively*). Now, my dear John, even you will not deny—that you are extremely fond of—er—Elaine.

CURTIS. Fond of her? Of course I'm fond of her! Do you think I'd be giving her twelve hundred pounds a year if I wasn't fond of her? Do you take me for an ass?

SIR PETER (*closing his eyes and beating the air with his hands*). I compared you to Don Quixote. No!—you're more like one of the windmills. There's no knowing where you'll catch me next. (*Resuming*) If you are sufficiently fond of her to spend all that on her, and to worry as you do, when you think her feelings will be hurt, how on earth can you say that you are not fond enough of her to make her your wife?

CURTIS. I don't say anything of the sort. Whether I'm fond of her or not—what right have I got to use my money to influence Elaine to tie herself for life to an old buffer like me?

SIR PETER. My dear John, she's living with you. If you've a right to ask her to do that, I should say it's no great exaction to ask her to marry you as well.

CURTIS. Of course, it's your duty as a clergyman to overrate the importance of marriage.

SIR PETER. On the contrary, I think that *you* are overrating it. You magnify it into a sort of bugbear. My point of view is that it's such a simple little concession to popular prejudice that only a very rigid moralist—like yourself—would ever put his friends and himself to the inconvenience of doing without it.

CURTIS. A marriage should be a love affair—a mutual love affair. She can't be expected to care anything about me.

SIR PETER. I should think that any woman must be very much in love with you to be able to put up with you for long. The fact of the matter, my dear John, is that you're too obstinate for a man who boasts that he gets his ideas out of his own head.

CURTIS (*surprised, but not resentful*). You call me obstinate?

SIR PETER (*laughfully*). In some matters. I—I don't say it's wrong to think for yourself. You may hit upon a great truth thereby. On the other hand, you may evolve a tremendous—er—howler. That is why a man who thinks for himself should be sufficiently—humble—to discard his ideas if experience

proves them erroneous. The supreme test of a theory is—"Will it work?"—a test which only experience can apply. Now, surely experience is proving these eccentric views of yours on marriage to be unpractical. In fact, you've become a crank on the subject. Mind, I'm not blaming you! For a man to think seriously about our marriage laws and not develop signs of lunacy would imply that he was a blockhead. And you are not a blockhead.

CURTIS. Thank you.

SIR PETER. Nevertheless, John, to adhere to every opinion you ever expressed just because you evolved it yourself argues conceit.

CURTIS (*impressed with the line of attack*). Conceit, eh?

SIR PETER (*winningly*). Well—doesn't it?

CURTIS. H'm! Go on.

SIR PETER (*over-confident and trying for another hold*). There is even another reason why you should marry her. You say you like to see her with young people. Young men.

CURTIS (*coming out of his reverie and resuming the fight*). Certainly, I do. You're not going to suggest that I can't trust her, I hope?

SIR PETER. I don't know what you mean by "can't trust her." Under the present conditions, how could it be a breach of trust for her to leave you for anyone—she—er—might be attracted by.

CURTIS (*scornfully*). Are you trying to make out that marriage is a safeguard against "attractions"? P'ff! You know it isn't. If she were married to me she'd be just as likely to fall in love with someone else as she is now. And just see how being married would complicate matters. I should have to divorce her—set her free so that she could marry the other man! Well, she *is* free now. Why the devil should I marry her just to set her free again?

SIR PETER (*wearily*). Pax! Pax! My dear John, a little of you goes a very long way.

CURTIS (*triumphantly*). You see . . .

SIR PETER. No! I don't see anything, but I give in. (*With much feeling*) Inquissimam Pacem, Justissimo Bello—Antefero.

CURTIS (*who has returned to the contemplation of SIR PETER's other argument*). Not but that you talk sense sometimes, Peter. (*Pauses and strikes a match.*) Of course—you're not consistent (*lights pipe methodically, then rises and looks sternly down at SIR PETER*), but you're *right—quite right*—about my being too obstinate.

(*Before SIR PETER can reply, CURTIS has marched off down R. smoking and thinking hard with his hands clasped behind*

him. SIR PETER *watches him off with a dawning hope that his philosophy has not been wasted after all.* MICKY and ELAINE *return up R.*)

MICKY. Hullo, Pete! Where's everyone gone to?

SIR PETER (*jumping up*). My brother-in-law has just left me. He went in that direction (*pointing after CURTIS*).

MICKY. Funny we didn't meet him. (*Suddenly*) Oh, we've lost Gerry.

SIR PETER (*with his eyebrows up*). Lost Mister Fellowes?

MICKY. Yes. He lagged behind and disappeared (*making ELAINE comfortable in the large chair*).

SIR PETER (*chattily*). These poetic young men, you know! Absent-minded . . .

MICKY. Absent-minded. Sulky because I was there.

SIR PETER (*to ELAINE*). Er—would you like me to find John for you?

MICKY (*eagerly*). I'll catch him if you want him. (*Dashes off R.*)

SIR PETER (*watching him off*). What abounding vitality! How delightful for oneself. Er—(*looks at ELAINE and sits down beside her and sets out to be very nice and friendly*)—It's a beautiful evening.

ELAINE (*politely*). Very. (*She is a little distraite.*)

SIR PETER. Yes. Yes. Very. Ha—do you mind if I smoke?

ELAINE. Not at all.

SIR PETER. Thank you. (*Places his hand in breast pocket and brings it out empty.*) Er (*looks in other pocket and finds that also empty*)—thank you. (*Continues search, and at last finds cigarette-case in waistcoat pocket. He takes a cigarette and hesitates.*) You are quite sure you don't mind my smoking?

ELAINE (*with a trace of amusement*). Quite sure.

SIR PETER. Thank you. (*Commences a protracted search for matches, which is unsuccessful. After a vague glance at the table, he returns the cigarette to the case and the case to his pocket, and repeats resignedly*) A beautiful evening!

ELAINE (*turning to him, with a smile*). Please smoke, Sir Peter, if you want to.

SIR PETER (*uncomfortably*). Er—I—ha—I don't think I will, after all, thanks. Er—I'm not a great smoker, you know.

ELAINE. Aren't you? John is.

SIR PETER. Yes. John is. I'd noticed that. Very bad for him, don't you think?

ELAINE. It doesn't seem to hurt him.

SIR PETER. No—no—perhaps it doesn't. You don't smoke yourself?

ELAINE. Sometimes.

SIR PETER (*apologetically*). Yes, yes — of course. Sometimes. (*There is a long pause.*) Would you like me to find John for you?

ELAINE (*breaking into a laugh at last*). Really, I don't want John, thank you. I'm sorry I make you so uncomfortable.

SIR PETER (*laughing, too, and speaking quite frankly*). The annoying part of it is, my dear young lady, that you don't make me uncomfortable in the least—only, I can't for the life of me think of anything to talk about.

ELAINE (*in a changed tone*). It's very kind of you to want to talk to me at all.

SIR PETER. Kind?

ELAINE. Lady Philox doesn't seem to want to.

SIR PETER (*evasively*). Well, you know . . .

ELAINE (*quietly*). Yes, I know.

(SIR PETER glances at her and, meeting her eye, gives a little shrug. ELAINE smiles back at him.)

ELAINE (*musingly*). You can have no idea how greatly Lady Philox reminds me of my mother.

SIR PETER (*surprised*). Of your mother?

ELAINE (*in the same tone*). Yes—it's quite startling sometimes. I can't help wondering—if my mother had lived—and you and Lady Philox had died—if I might not have married "well"—and Nelly Philox have ended in something like the position I am in to-day.

SIR PETER (*shocked*). My dear young lady!

ELAINE. Of course, other circumstances would have had to have been parallel, too. But—her upbringing was so exactly like mine. We were both intended to fill the position of a well-paid wife. We compared notes once at school and realised that. Why, neither of us could even dress herself or do her own hair, or knew anything of the purchasing value of money; and I'm quite sure that when Nelly left Winborne House Lady Philox took her around to every likely hunting-ground in Europe—just as my mother had taken me. Lady Philox was successful. . . . My mother—died, and left me three hundred pounds to finish the hunt for myself. I made a mess of it. (*Bitterly*) You know a girl really needs a mother—or some sort of saleswoman to strike the right sort of bargain for her.

SIR PETER. But . . . Why only three hundred pounds?

ELAINE (*quietly explaining*). My mother was a sort of gambler. She was living on her capital to give me my chance—as she called it. I suppose I should have had to reimburse her out of my profits as a wife.

SIR PETER. You speak bitterly of your mother.

ELAINE. Do you think I should be grateful to her?

SIR PETER. Er . . . (*Then shaking his head seriously*) Dear, dear, dear!

ELAINE (*more lightly*). Don't look so worried, Sir Peter. You've lived to see Nelly safely married.

SIR PETER. Yes. And—of course—she's devoted to Orchardson.

ELAINE (*dryly*). Of course. You see the force of the comparison?

SIR PETER. Yes. Oh yes. (*Very much perturbed*) Really, I'm wondering where it ceases. (*Getting up and walking about*) T't't't't!

ELAINE. You might ease your mind by asking me if I couldn't do honest work.

SIR PETER. Of course, she couldn't. I mean—of course, you couldn't. You weren't brought up to work. T't't't, t't! Really, you've quite distressed me. Are we . . .

(MICKY comes panting back.)

MICKY (*between gasps*). Can't find him anywhere. Did he—go—down the cliff—or up?

SIR PETER (*annoyed at the interruption*). I don't know which way he went.

MICKY (*apologising to ELAINE and wiping his forehead*). I'm awfully sorry.

ELAINE. It doesn't matter. I didn't want him.

MICKY. Didn't want him? Then what have I been running miles for?

ELAINE (*laughing*). I'm sorry you have. Perhaps he's got something on his mind. He'll walk for hours when he's thinking out anything.

SIR PETER. Will he, really? A very remarkable man, is he not?

(HENRI is seen drawing down the blinds of the dining-room windows, thereby obscuring all light save that of the moon and the great Chinese lantern on the tree.)

MICKY. Hullo! They're shutting up shop. I'm going to get some ice to put on my head. (*Goes to steps.*)

SIR PETER (*producing watch and endeavouring to tell time by faint light*). Do they close as early as this?

MICKY (*as he goes up the steps*). No. Only the dining-room. (*Exits through window.*)

SIR PETER. Dear me! It's a quarter to ten!

ELAINE. Don't let me keep you if you want to join Lady Philox.

SIR PETER. Er—yes, perhaps I ought to. I have some letters to write. Good-night. (*Gets as far as steps and then returns.*) I wanted to say, my dear young lady, that I hope you will—regard me as your friend if ever . . . (*breaks off self-consciously*). Dear me! It sounds ridiculously theatrical, doesn't it?

ELAINE. No. Really, I'm very grateful.

SIR PETER. I suppose that the—ah—kindlier sentiments are so very old and universal that it is impossible to express them without sounding hackneyed. Good-night. (*Holds out his hand.*)

ELAINE (*Giving him hers*). Good-night.

(SIR PETER goes into the hotel. ELAINE remains in the large chair under the Chinese lantern idly turning the pages of her book. GERALD enters up R. and crosses behind her towards the steps. He sees her and comes gently down and drops into chair by her side.)

GERALD. Elaine!

ELAINE (*momentarily startled*). Oh—I—thought it was you!

GERALD (*reproachfully*). Then why didn't you run away from me?

ELAINE. Why should I?

GERALD. You have been avoiding me all the evening.

ELAINE. No, I haven't.

GERALD. Yes, you have. You know you have. We've always been for a walk together after dinner. Why wouldn't you come to-night?

ELAINE. I did.

GERALD (*indignantly*). Yes, and brought Micky along too. (*Bending towards her and speaking in a more tender tone*) Elaine!

ELAINE. Yes?

GERALD. Didn't you know that I loved you?

ELAINE. I (*smiling suddenly*)—yes, I suppose I did.

GERALD. Don't laugh. Please don't laugh. I don't think you know even now how much. Dear—I could no more help kissing you than I can help loving you. I love you more now than I did then, and I shall go on loving you more with every hour I live.

ELAINE. Don't, please.

GERALD (*with a touch of cruelty*). It can't hurt you to know how much I love you. I suppose I've just got to go away and leave you to the husband you care nothing for. It's that that makes me furious. If you had ever cared for him I would have gone away and left you without a word.

ELAINE. You are going now?

GERALD. Early to-morrow, before anyone here is up. I want to say good-bye now.

ELAINE. Good-bye.

(GERALD immediately takes her in his arms.)

GERALD (*passionately*). Oh, my dear, my dear, I want to hold you here for ever! I love you. Why do you send me away? You must love me, too—I know you do. Tell me that you do.

ELAINE (*smiling into his face*). If you know that I do . . .

GERALD (*reproachfully*). You smile at everything. Can't you be serious for a moment?

ELAINE. Aren't you serious enough for both of us? (*He releases her angrily.*) Don't look so hurt. It'll be all right in a few months. I'm glad you're going away. It was silly of us to

go on like this. I suppose it is only that I'm lonely, and you're young and romantic.

GERALD (*incredulously*). I am young and romantic? How little you really know me.

ELAINE (*gently*). Aren't you?

GERALD. I thought you cared for me?

ELAINE (*smiling at him bravely*). I do—now. I shall get over it.

GERALD (*amazed*). Get over it! Do you want to get over it?

ELAINE. The greatest happiness is to get over things.

GERALD. You're bitter and cynical; I don't wonder. You've had nothing in all your life to make you otherwise until you met me. I only wish I could make you take a more sympathetic view of life. I'd like to take you right away from Curtis and everything that has warped and embittered your nature, and show you what a beautiful, noble thing life can be. (*Suddenly caught by the idea.*) Elaine . . .

ELAINE (*compelled to answer by his pause*). Yes?

GERALD. If I asked you to, would you come away with me?

ELAINE (*frightened*). We can be seen from the windows!

GERALD (*magnificently*). Let them see. Would you?

ELAINE (*remonstrating feebly*). My dear . . .

GERALD (*impulsively*). Oh, say you would! Leave this husband who drags you down to his own level, and come with me. I know that under all your hardness and bitterness there is a beautiful woman's soul that is fainting for love. Come with me and give it life before it is too late. I beg you to.

ELAINE. Do you really love me so much?

GERALD. I never knew what love was until I met you.

ELAINE (*with a warning smile*). Lurline?

GERALD (*hotly*). I was a boy. I told you I only thought I loved her.

ELAINE. Perhaps you only think you love me.

GERALD. Elaine, come with me, and you will know whether I love you or not. Time will tell.

ELAINE. And suppose time says "not"?

GERALD (*angrily*). If you can do nothing but make fun of me . . .

ELAINE (*stopping him with a gesture*). No, no. Don't go like that. I don't want you to think that I don't appreciate your goodness. But—it's impossible—you must see.

GERALD. Why is it impossible? You love me; you are not happy with Curtis . . .

ELAINE. I'm not unhappy with him.

GERALD. You can't be anything but unhappy with a man you don't love.

ELAINE (*quietly, half to herself*). Yes, you can—in a way.

GERALD (*angrily*). Don't try to be worldly.

ELAINE. I'm not trying to be worldly. I mean it. Really, until I met you I thought I was quite content.

GERALD (*servently*). Thank God we met. It is not too late. Worldly content has not yet robbed you of the power to love. Elaine, you have dreamt you were content, but I offer you happiness. Come with me. We will go to Italy, and there in the hills about Rome we will buy a little villa with . . .

ELAINE. Why should you burden your life with me?

GERALD. Burden my life? You would be the dearest burden man ever bore.

ELAINE (*sadly*). But still a burden. Gerald, what would you find to do in a little villa in the hills around Rome? You are a young man with the world before you. It wouldn't be fair to you . . .

GERALD. Don't think of me, think of yourself. Think of the years to come if you send me away. How will you live them through—*without me*? You will be alone but for this husband whom you care nothing for. How utterly lonely you will be as the years pass! Lonely in spirit. Why, you haven't even a child to "clothe the father with a dearness not his due." Elaine, can you look forward to those years without shrinking? Put the fear of them behind you. Come with me. You owe it to yourself not to refuse happiness when I offer it to you.

ELAINE. Don't I owe anything to John?

GERALD (*shocked at the bare suggestion*). Good heavens! What slaves of convention women are! You don't love him. A marriage without love means nothing. You owe him nothing. Even now you are more mine than his, because you love me.

ELAINE (*resting her head on her hands hopelessly*). Oh dear, oh dear!

GERALD (*annoyed*). Really—I'm sorry if I make you unhappy.

ELAINE. It's all so hopeless. I'm older than you.

GERALD. What on earth has that got to do with it if I don't mind? You're making excuses now, because you're afraid to take one decisive step.

ELAINE (*brokenly*). Don't, don't!

GERALD (*very insulted at her unhappiness*). Good God! You look as if I were being perfectly beastly to you. And all the time I'm only thinking of your happiness.

ELAINE. I know, dear . . . (*Holds out her hand appealingly.*)

GERALD (*taking her hand and speaking firmly*). Make up your mind to come with me, and don't worry any more.

ELAINE (*hopelessly*). Very well.

GERALD. Oh, please say it as if you wanted to, dear.

ELAINE. I do want to, but . . .

GERALD. Yes, yes, I know. Women are all alike. When their heart's desire is within their reach they hesitate to take it, one and all. (*Putting his arms about her tenderly*) Poor child, you've had little enough happiness in your life. But now . . . (*His tone changing with the sincerity of his belief in himself*) Oh, I'll be so good to you, dear.

ELAINE. I know you will.

GERALD. "Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments." Oh, my dear one, I've loved you since the world began. (*Kisses her and then releases her and looks serious.*) Now to get away. You must come with me to-night.

ELAINE. To-night.

GERALD (*looking at watch*). Yes.

ELAINE (*smiling at his impetuosity*). We can't . . .

GERALD. We will. Do you think I'd let you stay another hour with Curtis now that you are mine? We'll be off within an hour.

ELAINE. How?

GERALD. Motor. I'll hire a car in the town and bring it back here—not to the door, of course, but as far as the road. Then I'll come back here and fetch you. By daybreak we shall be a hundred miles away. (*Takes her hands and looks at her.*) You don't look very happy even now.

ELAINE (*smiling at her confession*). I'm a little frightened.

GERALD (*with gentle reproach*). That's not very complimentary to me, is it? I'm going to devote my whole life to you; you might trust me.

ELAINE. I—trust you, but (*nervously*)—it seems such a—plunge.

GERALD. Of course it's a plunge.

ELAINE (*half to herself*). I used to be afraid that I might fall in love some day—and leave John, and drift—until I became like those poor women I've seen sometimes in hotels, and restaurants, and casinos—drifting from one shabby love to another because they left *safety* and took the plunge that I'm taking now.

GERALD (*resentfully*). What do you mean by "left safety"?

ELAINE. It's something very precious; the knowledge that you're safe.

GERALD (*touched*). Poor dear. You're frightening yourself needlessly. You'll be quite safe with me. As soon as you are free I'll marry you. You know that. You're doing nothing wrong in leaving your husband, nothing at all. (*Looking at watch*) I must be off for the car. I'll be back here for you by half-past eleven. Be in the little reading-room. We shall be in the car all night, so wrap up well. (*Kissing her*) See how considerate I'm getting.

ELAINE (*chaffingly*). Yes, almost as considerate as John.

GERALD. Oh, Elaine!

ELAINE. I was only joking.

GERALD. Yes, I know, but . . . (*Suddenly*) Here, I must be off. I shall have to knock them up at White's. (*Starts to go.*)

ELAINE (*stopping him*). Wait a minute, Gerald.

GERALD (*humouring her*). Well?

ELAINE. Don't think I am always nervous and undecided—as I have been to-night.

GERALD (*kindly*). I'm sure you're not. This has been an exceptional strain to your nerves. I quite understand. (*Turning away.*)

ELAINE (*stopping him again*). No, no. (*Very sweetly*) Don't go for a minute. (*Quietly, after a pause*) Dear—I love you—and I'll try to be as light a burden to you as I can.

GERALD (*tenderly*). You dear silly baby. (*Kisses her and runs off into hotel.*)

(*ELAINE stands for a moment looking after him, and then turns and meets CURTIS entering R., his hands still behind him and his pipe still in his mouth.*)

CURTIS. Hullo. All by yourself?

ELAINE. Yes.

CURTIS (*his attention arrested by the change in her voice*). Child, you do look ill! What's the matter?

ELAINE. Nothing.

CURTIS (*with sudden savageness*). Has Mary been worrying you?

ELAINE (*surprised*). Mary?—Oh no.

CURTIS. She'd better not. What's wrong, then? You're worried about something. (*Abruptly*) Look here. Don't you think we'd better get married?

ELAINE. What?

CURTIS. Get married. Not such a remarkable idea, is it?

ELAINE (*sinking into a chair and breaking into a weak but genuine laugh*). Oh, John! After all you've said.

CURTIS. Yes. I know all about that. But a man can change his mind if he's got one. This state of affairs is killing you. Look at you now.

ELAINE. The—state of affairs has nothing to do with it, really. I'd forgotten it.

CURTIS. You'll marry me?

ELAINE (*shaking her head*). You're very good—but—now . . .

CURTIS. What do you mean by "now"?

ELAINE. I want to leave you.

(*CURTIS is obviously knocked out by this intelligence, but he recovers his self-control and picks up his pipe, which he let fall.*)

CURTIS. Leave me?

ELAINE. Yes.

CURTIS. Why?—I beg your pardon. Don't tell me. Of course it's your own affair entirely. (*Studies his pipe for a moment, then fiercely*) It's not Mary, is it?

ELAINE. No, no!

CURTIS. If I thought it was Mary . . .

ELAINE. It's not, really.

CURTIS. Of course I'm no companion to you, but—no, no. I'm not asking for an explanation. You're free to do just as you

like, and so am I. That's the understanding. And you won't marry me? (*Answering himself hastily*) No, no, of course not. It doesn't matter. Good-night. (*Turns to go.*)

ELAINE (*suddenly*). John!

CURTIS (*stopping*). Yes?

ELAINE. Why did you suggest marriage?

CURTIS. Isn't it obvious? To make things more comfortable for you.

ELAINE (*strangely disappointed*). Oh. Is that all?

CURTIS. What other reason could I have?

ELAINE. I didn't know. I wondered.

CURTIS (*hesitating on the steps*). I'm sorry you should want to leave me. But of course you're free to. That's the understanding. (*Then very vehemently, under his breath*) Damn the understanding. (*Exits into hotel.*)

(CURTAIN.)

ACT III

SCENE

SAME AS ACT I., SAVE THAT THE CENTRE DOORS ARE CLOSED
AND THE ELECTRIC LIGHTS ARE LIT

MICKY is discovered above table industriously playing patience :
the game known as Miss Milligan. SIR PETER slumbers
peacefully in the large chair down R.

MICKY plays undisturbed for a moment, then he looks up as
CURTIS enters L.

CURTIS (*crossing to bookshelf*). Come to fetch a book.

MICKY (*critically*). That's the fourth book you've come down for
in the last half-hour.

CURTIS. I can't find anything worth reading.

MICKY (*unable to advise*). I don't know what they've got here.

CURTIS (*selecting book at random*). This looks promising.

MICKY. What is it ?

CURTIS (*looking at it*). Er—somebody's memoirs. (*The name not
being legible on the back, he turns up the title page.*) Madame—
Madame . . .

MICKY. Why, you don't even know what you've taken !

CURTIS (*shortly*). The name had slipped me. (*Crossing.*) Good-
night.

MICKY. Good-night. (*CURTIS exits. MICKY resumes his patience
with a corrugated brow.*) It's not coming out, Pete.

SIR PETER (*waking*). Eh ?

MICKY (*seeing an opening*). Pause, brethren, pause ! (*Makes an
adjustment.*) Aha ! That helps us a bit. (*Looks at his pack.*)
I've only got a dozen cards left. Getting quite exciting, eh ?
Sort of mixture of "Thumbs down" and "She loves me—she
loves me not."

SIR PETER (*not understanding*). I'm afraid I must have dozed.

(HENRI enters L. and stands waiting.)

MICKY (*looking up*). Well ?

HENRI. Shall you be long in here, sir ?

MICKY (*studying cards*). About six weeks, at this rate. What is it ?

HENRI. I wished to know, sir, whether you would be so kind as
to ring the bell when Mr. Fellowes comes in, so that I can close
the windows.

MICKY. Mr. Fellowes? Where is he?

HENRI. In the garden, I believe, sir.

MICKY (*surprised*). In the garden? All by himself?

HENRI. Everyone else is indoors, sir. It is past eleven.

MICKY. You want to shut up, eh?

HENRI. If you please, sir.

MICKY. You're a lazy lot in the country. You won't be able to turn in so early when the season's in full swing, will you?

HENRI. No, sir.

MICKY (*dismissing him*). All right. I'll ring when he comes in.

HENRI. Thank you, sir. May I suggest, sir (*most deferentially pointing to cards*)—the five on the six.

MICKY. Eh? Yes, yes. I'd seen that. (*Makes move.*) I was thinking.

HENRI. Thank you, sir.

(*Exits.*)

MICKY (*playing on*). Hear that, Pete? Not come in from the garden yet? Soulful brute! He's mooching about and gazing at her windows, I'll bet! (*Throws down last card.*) It's all up! It's not come out! Thumbs down have it! (*Dramatically over cards*) So fell Giraldo! The cards have spoken.

SIR PETER (*meekly*). I'm afraid I don't quite follow you.

MICKY (*collecting and shuffling cards*). I've been staking his fate—or Elaine's—on the game. If it came out it meant she'd have the sense to turn him down, and all would be well. If it didn't come out—elopements, scandals! And all sorts of horrors, with us looking on and saying, "I told you so."

(*LADY PHILOX enters L. and closes doors mysteriously behind her.*)

MICKY. Hullo, Lady Phil! Not gone bye-byes yet?

LADY P. (*sitting L. of table*). I've been looking everywhere for you, Micky.

MICKY (*apprehensively*). Oh?

LADY P. (*impressively*). Yes. You must talk to poor Gerald.

MICKY (*recognising her meaning but dodging it.*) Bless you, I'm always talking to poor Gerald. He doesn't complain of loneliness, does he?

LADY P. Please don't pretend you don't understand. This is extremely serious. I was looking out of my window over an hour ago, now, and I saw Gerald kissing that woman.

MICKY (*without surprise*). Kissing Elaine? (*Resignedly to SIR PETER*) There you are, Pete! I told you so.

LADY P. (*firmly*). You must speak to him at once.

MICKY (*impatiently*). Good Lord, Lady Phil, I can't waltz in and lecture Gerry for kissing a pretty woman. He'd only tell me to go to Houndsditch, and quite right too. There are limits even to my cheek. I've done all I could in a nice,

graceful way, and he resented *that*. I know it's getting serious. I've just been telling Pete so. He confided in her about Lurline this afternoon. I bet he kissed her then. That's twice he's kissed her.

LADY P. (*snorting angrily*). Twice? He kissed her a dozen times at least while I was at the window.

MICKY (*peevishly*). Pity you didn't jump out on them. I beg your pardon, Lady Phil. I didn't mean to be rude that time. But—really—what's the good of coming to me?

LADY P. You were saying only this afternoon—leave it all to you. You knew the exact moment at which something should be done.

MICKY (*regretfully and resentfully*). Yes, I know I was. So I do. This is it. Something should be done now. But it doesn't follow that because I know the exact moment when something ought to be done, I know how to do it. I've been chewing it for an hour past, and I've come to the conclusion that we can't do anything but look on and trust to luck. It may not come to anything even now.

LADY P. Unless I was mistaken, he was asking her to run away with him.

MICKY. Phew . . .

SIR PETER (*very upset*). Not really? Dear, dear, dear!

MICKY. Did she seem willing?

LADY P. (*very indignantly*). She didn't seem able to say.

SIR PETER. She hesitated? (*Shaking head.*) Tut, tut, tut. This is very serious.

MICKY (*ever hopeful*). Perhaps she hasn't made up her mind.

LADY P. (*dogmatically*). A woman who hesitates has always made up her mind.

MICKY. She's a sensible woman. She must see whether Curtis or Gerry is the better man.

LADY P. There may be two opinions as to that.

SIR PETER. I am afraid the better man is rather severely handicapped when he happens to be the lady's husband.

MICKY. That's true. And Gerry looks jolly well in the shop window. Heaps of romance, and soul, and infernal selfishness to appeal to the mother instinct. Yes. It's odds on she loses her head.

LADY P. (*scornfully*). Loses *her* head?

MICKY. Oh, it's those dignified, restful women who are the most liable to. Especially over anyone who can make 'em wish they'd never been born, and I'll back Gerry to do that. (*Accepting the worst*) Of course I shall be sorry for Curtis if his wife does a guy with Giraldo; and I shall be sorry for her too; and I don't like the idea of seeing Gerry mixed up in a divorce case—but there you are!

LADY P. (*smiling*). So you think there'd be a divorce case?

MICKY. Old Curtis would never play the dog-in-the-manger. Of course Gerry would marry her right enough. That's when I'd begin to be sorry for her.

LADY P. Micky, there wouldn't be a divorce case. The woman is not John's wife.

MICKY. What?

LADY P. I say the woman is not John's wife. I suppose you understand me?

(MICKY turns an amazed gaze upon SIR PETER.)

SIR PETER (*corroborating unwillingly.*) It is quite true, Mister Seelby.

But I must add that they have been living together some years, and it would hurt my brother-in-law just as much . . .

LADY P. (*testily.*) Peter, please be quiet.

MICKY (*his intense surprise culminating in a prolonged whistle.*)

Phew! This does alter the case.

LADY P. I am glad you realise it.

MICKY. Oh, I realise it right enough. Gosh, what a near thing! . . .

And we were going to look on and let him go off with her without doing a thing!

LADY P. I expect you to warn Gerald at once.

MICKY. Oh, rather. I'll warn him off somehow. It's a jolly serious matter. When you bolt with a man's wife he generally rings up his solicitor; but when you interfere in a *ménage* of this sort he is more likely to borrow a big stick. Gerry's looking for trouble. (*Pauses.*) I can't say I fancy telling him, though.

LADY P. Why not?

MICKY. Well—she won't thank me, will she? It's playing it pretty low down to spoil a woman's chances with a man she's set her heart on.

LADY P. Perhaps you would rather see your friend fall into the hands of an unscrupulous woman . . .

MICKY. Oh, I don't think she's that, Lady Phil.

LADY P. (*cuttingly.*) No. Of course you don't. You're a man. It's only necessary for a woman to be the most blatant type of adventuress imaginable for every man who sets eyes on her to defend her through thick and thin.

SIR P. (*pleasantly.*) Mary, what has the lady's *character* to do with the situation? If she were three times married to John I should still be sorry to see her do anything precipitate, for her own sake, and Mister Fellowes's, as well as my brother-in-law's.

LADY P. You're very anxious about your brother-in-law. I should think he could look after himself. He'd no business to bring the woman here to set her cap at decent people under the pretence that she's his wife.

MICKY. If she's been encouraging Gerry, I think it's because she's sweet on him, really, I do.

LADY P. Oh, very likely. Women of that sort always fall in love sooner or later.

SIR PETER (*rising*). Mary, I must ask you not to refer to her as a "woman of that sort." It is an invidious description at the best. She is a charming and unfortunate young woman who—but for my brother-in-law's mistaken ideas would be in an exactly the same position as hundreds of women who marry for money. Indeed, in her case there is the saving consideration . . .

LADY P. Peter!

SIR PETER (*checked, but determined*). The saving consideration . . .

LADY P. Peter!

SIR PETER (*shaken*). That she . . .

LADY P. Peter, will you please be quiet?

(SIR PETER *is subdued*.)

LADY P. (*turning to Micky*). I want a clear understanding that you will tell Gerry what this woman is *to-night*—or else . . .

MICKY (*hopefully*). Yes?

LADY P. (*rising*). I shall be compelled to ask Sir Peter to do so.

(LADY PHILOX *exits L.*)

MICKY (*to Sir Peter*). Oho! I was hoping the alternative would be that she would do it herself. Not a very pleasant job, is it?

SIR PETER (*sympathetically*). Not at all a pleasant job, Mister Seelby. But of course the young man must be told. That is, if the lady does not tell him herself.

MICKY. I'd never thought of that. She won't, though—until it's too late.

SIR PETER (*with some severity*). If she is encouraging his attentions she *should* . . .

MICKY. If she is encouraging his attentions she's got her hands full keeping up with his last remark but one without supplying any fresh topic of conversation herself. I know Gerry.

SIR PETER. I hope the poor child is not really in love with him. It will be a great blow to her if she is. But, as a right-minded young man, he would not take her away from Curtis without marrying her; and as a gentleman he cannot possibly marry a woman who has been another man's mistress—so . . .
(*Shakes his head sadly*.)

MICKY (*philosophically*). Well, let's hope it will teach her not to go falling in love with right-minded young men when there's a wrong-minded old duffer at her elbow who's worth ten of 'em.

(*The C. doors are thrown open, and GERALD enters quickly, and stops awkwardly on seeing SIR PETER and MICKY. He wears a light coat and a hat.*)

GERALD. Hullo! I thought you'd all be abed.

SIR PETER (*rising*). I was just retiring when you came in. (*Crossing to door L.*) Good-night, Mister Fellowes. Good-night, Mr. Seelby. (*Then as a parting benediction to Gerald*) Good-night. (*Exits with a parting smile.*)

GERALD (*going to fireplace*). Good-natured old chap, Sir Peter is. He always looks at you as if he had a particular interest in you. (*Musingly*) There's something in his eye that's not so much *friendly* . . . though it's friendly as well—but it's more . . . (*Pauses for a word.*) Well—"interested" is the only word that describes it.

MICKY (*mechanically putting out cards as he revolves the duty before him*). Where have you been?

GERALD. Eh? (*Evasively*) Oh—just along the cliff. Why?

MICKY. All alone?

GERALD. Yes. Why do you ask?

MICKY. Oh—I . . . (*Shrugs his shoulders and continues pulling out cards.*)

GERALD (*restlessly after a pause*). I say, aren't you going to bed?

MICKY. No, I don't think so.

GERALD (*looking at his watch*). You're generally such an early bird down here. It's nearly half-past eleven.

MICKY. Sit down a minute, Gerry. I want to talk to you.

GERALD (*impatiently*). Do you ever want to do anything else?

MICKY. Don't be ratty. You know . . . (*Breaks off and makes a fresh start.*) You know . . . (*Looks up.*) Do sit down and listen, old chap, to oblige me.

GERALD (*arrested by his manner*). What's the matter with you?

MICKY. You know I was talking to you about running after Elaine . . .

GERALD (*instantly very angry*). I told you once . . .

MICKY. Steady. I've got to tell you this.

GERALD (*surprised*). Tell me what?

MICKY. You've got to chuck it, Gerry. You've been running after her under the impression that she was Curtis's wife.

GERALD (*not understanding*). What?

MICKY (*more clearly*). You'd look a nice fool if you were to bolt with a man's mistress under the impression that you were eloping with his wife, wouldn't you?

(GERALD *has slowly grasped the situation. He now leaps upon MICKY and grabs him by the back of the neck, pressing his head down on the table among the patience cards, some of which fall to the floor.*)

MICKY (*his nose ground into the table*). Here, steady on; you're upsetting Miss Milligan. Don't be an ass, Gerry.

(GERALD *releases him and stands shaking. He has taken it very badly and is quite hysterical. MICKY leaves his chair and stoops to pick up the fallen cards, and when he*

straightens his back again GERALD has thrown himself into his chair and, with his head buried in his arms upon the table, is sobbing violently.)

MICKY (*after regarding him dubiously for a moment*). Poor old chap!

I didn't think you'd take it as badly as this.

GERALD (*looking up fiercely*). It's a lie.

MICKY (*apologetically but firmly*). No, it isn't.

GERALD. She—Elaine—why do you tell me now?

MICKY. Because I've only just found out.

GERALD (*tragically*). Micky—I loved her. We were going away together to-night. It was all arranged.

MICKY. Had she agreed to . . .

GERALD (*nodding*). Without telling me.

MICKY. You see I was quite right to.

GERALD. Oh, quite right. Quite right. (*Miserably*) Thank you, Micky.

MICKY. That's all right. (*Sympathetically*) I'm sorry you're so cut up, but it's an impasse, isn't it? You can't go on with it.

People would say all sorts of funny things.

GERALD. Do you think I'm caring what people would say?

MICKY (*apprehensively, as he thinks he scents heroism*). Eh?

GERALD (*insistently*). I say, do you think that I'd let what the world thought influence me?

MICKY. I say, Gerry—you're not going ahead with it in spite of what I've told you.

GERALD (*furiously*). Going ahead with it? No. Of course I'm not. But not from fear of what people might say. When I believed her to be Curtis's wife I was willing to take her away from him and face the scandal.

MICKY (*judicially*). It wouldn't have been much to face. No humour in it. A scandal's easy enough to live down so long as it doesn't make people smile whenever they meet you. Society would have forgiven you in a year.

GERALD. Damn Society! You seem to think that I am going to give up Elaine for fear of being laughed at.

MICKY. Well—aren't you?

GERALD. You must think me a contemptible coward. I am giving her up because I've found out what she is—a mercenary—who thinks only of money—who sells . . .

MICKY. Here, chuck it, Gerry! Why the dickens should a woman who thinks only of money want to leave Curtis for you?

GERALD (*with a sneer*). Because, in her way, she loves me. There is no nature which is not susceptible to love.

MICKY (*with some anger*). Oh, you admit that.

GERALD. Oh yes. She loved me. And I loved her too—or thought I did. Thank God I have found out what she is before it is too late.

MICKY. Look here, Gerry, I want you to break with Elaine because I don't want to see you get yourself into a ridiculous mess, and perhaps get thrashed by Curtis into the bargain. That's a good worldly reason, and I hoped that you'd look at it the same way. For you to say that you're breaking with her because she's vile and not good enough for you and all that rot—well—it's damned blackguardly. It's adding insult to injury. You're a howling cad, Gerry, to look at it that way. Elaine's one of the best, and I only hope she sees what a confounded prig you are. It'll help her to get over losing you quicker than anything.

(MICKY exits indignantly L. GERALD remains seated above table looking straight ahead of him. Self-conscious tragedy is in every angle of his pose. HENRI enters L.)

HENRI. May I close the windows, sir?

(GERALD nods and, rising, goes to fireplace, where he rests his elbow on the mantelshelf. HENRI goes into inner room, where he can be heard locking windows. A clock somewhere strikes the half-hour. There is a moment's pause, and then ELAINE enters L., flushed and excited. She wears an evening cloak.)

ELAINE (breathlessly). Here I am. Have you been waiting? I am so excited. I don't wonder so many women elope; it's most awfully . . . (HENRI in the inner room clicks window-fastening. She turns and sees him.) Oh! (Coming over to Gerald and speaking in a hushed tone) I've put on a warm travelling dress under my evening cloak. Aren't I clever? I couldn't risk . . . (Looking at him and giving a little laugh) Why, you're the one who's looking frightened now.

(ELAINE stops hastily as HENRI returns through the room to door L. and exits, closing door after him.)

ELAINE (unable to repress her excitement). I shall have to buy clothes on the way. I . . .

GERALD (breaking silence at last). Elaine, why did you teach me to love you?

ELAINE (smiling up at him). I suppose be . . . (Stops, frightened at his expression.) Gerald!

GERALD. Why did you let me kiss you?

ELAINE. What's the matter?

GERALD. I've found out about you—what you are to Curtis. And you were going to let me take you away without telling me.

ELAINE. No—I wasn't. I meant to tell you . . . only . . . somehow . . . I never quite had the courage to. I . . . (breaking off and speaking more easily). After all, it makes things easier, doesn't it? We shan't have to wait for John to set me free.

GERALD. Is that all the difference it makes to you? Did you never realise the shame of your position?

ELAINE (*hurt*). Often. I never got away from it, until I met you.

GERALD (*bitterly*). And in your gratitude you were going to link your life with mine, knowing what you were.

ELAINE. Gerald! What do you mean? Don't you want me to leave John now that you know?

GERALD. I loved a woman good and beautiful and pure. Are you these things?

ELAINE (*gently*). You thought so. I . . .

GERALD. You taught me to.

ELAINE. Gerald!

GERALD. You played your part well.

ELAINE (*reasonably*). Gerald, don't go on like this. I'd have told you. I meant to. It's very unfortunate that I didn't. But—because I didn't—you seem to think that I—I—can't really care for you. I do, dear. Does what you have found out make such a difference? Oh . . . I'm not going to defend the position I have been in. It was horrible, I know. But you thought my position as John's wife horrible too. You said so. You thought that could be set aside. Why can't this? Why, it's over now. I told John this evening that I would leave him.

GERALD. Now that you've found some fool to marry you.

ELAINE (*patiently*). Why should I want "some fool" to marry me?

GERALD. Didn't you just say that you realised the shame of your position? Didn't you say that you wanted to leave it behind you? I was to be the dupe who conferred the status of marriage upon you. The *mari complaisant* . . .

ELAINE (*gently*). I should scarcely choose you for a *mari complaisant*, my dear.

GERALD. No other came along.

ELAINE (*still patiently*). Listen to me for a moment. Somebody has been telling you more than the truth, you poor excitable boy. I can guess who it was.

GERALD. Seelby.

ELAINE (*surprised*). Mister Seelby? Why should he . . .

GERALD (*outsneering himself*). To save me making a laughing-stock of myself.

ELAINE (*understanding*). He's your friend. (*Appealingly*) Oh, Gerald, I don't know what he told you, but if it was anything worse than that I have been living with John for five years, depending upon him for food and clothes—just as his wife would have done; keeping his house for him, quarrelling with him sometimes, looking after him when he was ill, and then meeting you—all just as John's wife would have done, and finally deciding to leave everything and follow you wherever

you chose to take me—if he told you more or less against me than this, he told you too much, or too little.

GERALD. He told me you were Curtis's mistress, and that was sufficient. I have loved a dream, and the reality disgusts me.

ELAINE (*accepting defeat*). Then there is nothing more to be said?

GERALD. No. (*Turns to mantelpiece.*)

ELAINE. You . . . (*breaking down*).

GERALD (*turning*). What?

ELAINE (*pulling herself together*). Nothing. (*Goes out L.*)

END OF SCENE I.

SCENE 2

CURTIS'S PRIVATE SITTING-ROOM

A small room simply but well furnished in light wood and chintz, with a light-coloured carpet, and light, pretty wall-paper. The door is R. A fireplace is up C., and French windows—wide open and showing the dark tree-tops and sky—are L. R. of the fireplace is a Chesterfield. A square table is just L. of C., with an arm-chair R. of it, and an ordinary chair L. of it. A large standard lamp stands above window, throwing its shaded light over the table and two chairs.

CURTIS is discovered seated in the chair L. of table, tilted back with his feet upon a white wood pedestal that supports a flower-pot just below window. He is looking sternly out into the night and smoking hard. He has probably been in that position for some time. A book and a newspaper are on the table. A moment passes in perfect silence, then he suddenly turns his head, hearing a footstep. The door opens, and ELAINE stands on the threshold. She is crying. She stops on seeing him.

ELAINE. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't . . . (*Turns as if to go.*)

(CURTIS jumps from his chair and comes to her.)

CURTIS. My dear . . .

(ELAINE draws back, he puts his arm around her, and brings her to chair R. of table and makes her sit down. He sits on the arm of chair, still holding her hands. She leans wearily in his direction. He produces a handkerchief and tenderly tries to wipe the tears from her cheeks. She smiles at him through her tears.)

CURTIS. Poor child. You are having a rough time of it, aren't you? There, there.

ELAINE (*gratefully*). How good you are. (*Suddenly, as if it occurs to her*) Oh—I'm not leaving you after all.

CURTIS (*dryly*). H'm. Is that what you are crying your eyes out over?

ELAINE (*penitently*). I'm sorry.

CURTIS. Because if it is I think I'd rather you left me. I'm not quite an ogre.

ELAINE. You're far too kind to me. (*Suddenly again*) John.

CURTIS. Well?

ELAINE. I ought to tell you. You may not want me back when you know.

CURTIS. Don't tell me anything you don't want to. You haven't left me yet, you know.

ELAINE. I must tell you. I wanted to leave you because I—fell in love with somebody else.

CURTIS (*nodding sagely*). Yes, I had come to the conclusion it must be that. But I can't for the life of me think who you've found to fall in love with.

ELAINE. Do you want me to tell you?

CURTIS. Not unless you want to.

ELAINE. I—I'd rather not. We've parted and—it doesn't matter.

CURTIS (*sharply*). Parted? Why?

ELAINE. He found out about you.

CURTIS (*mystified*). But, I thought that everyone you knew, knew about me. You never go anywhere without me.

ELAINE. He thought you were my husband.

CURTIS. Do you mean you've parted from him because I'm not?

ELAINE. Yes.

CURTIS. Well . . . but . . . Why on earth should you fall out with a man you love because you are not married?

ELAINE. He . . . It was his wish, not mine.

CURTIS (*slowly understanding, and then giving vent to a burst of indignation*). The cad! Who is he?

ELAINE. You said . . .

CURTIS (*firmly*). I want to know.

ELAINE. Gerald . . . Mr. Fellowes.

CURTIS (*incredulously*). Young Fellowes who's staying here? You're in love with him?

ELAINE (*slightly annoyed at his surprise*). Who did you think it was?

CURTIS. I couldn't guess. I've been racking my brains, but I never dreamt of him. Why, he's only a boy.

ELAINE. He's twenty-five.

CURTIS (*absolutely amazed*). And you're in love—with him?

(*Angrily*) Well, there's certainly no accounting for taste.

ELAINE. You seem surprised.

CURTIS. Surprised? I'm thunderstruck! If anybody'd told me you could fall in love with that unlicked cub, I'd have knocked them down. Well, you're lucky to find out in time what kind of cad he is.

ELAINE (*up in arms at once*). What do you mean by calling him a cad?

CURTIS. Well, isn't it a bit caddish to make love to you as long as he thinks you're my wife, and now to drop you when you tell him you're free?

ELAINE. I didn't tell him. He found out from somebody else. I wanted to tell him, but I was afraid to, and I put it off until it was too late, and he had asked me to run away with him.

CURTIS. He was willing to run away with you when he thought you were my wife?

ELAINE. Yes. We were going to-night. It was all arranged. Oh, can't you see what he must think of me, believing me to be perfect, and then finding out from a friend what I am? Oh, if I'd only had the courage to tell him myself, he might have understood, but now—he thinks I deceived him on purpose. He is young, and he has high ideals of purity and honour. He hates me for having killed his illusions. I don't blame him. I blame myself for ever having placed myself in a position where he can only despise me. I have myself to thank for it. He is quite right to hate me, too.

CURTIS (*angry at her self-condemnation and unwilling to believe that she has so little spirit*). Do you mean to say that you love him still—after . . . (*Entirely changing his tone as he appreciates the womanliness of her attitude towards Gerald*) You poor dear. (*He touches her hair lightly, then goes up and rings bell which is beside fireplace, and stands waiting. In a few seconds a footstep is heard. He goes quickly to the door and, opening it, stands between HENRI, who is on the threshold, and ELAINE.*) Is Mister Fellowes downstairs?

(ELAINE looks up.)

HENRI (*outside door*). In the small reading-room, I believe, sir.

CURTIS. Ask him to come up here for a moment, please.

HENRI. Yes, sir.

(CURTIS closes door.)

ELAINE. John!

CURTIS. Yes?

ELAINE. What do you want him for?

CURTIS. You leave this to me.

ELAINE. Please don't say anything to him about . . .

CURTIS (*soothingly*). It'll be all right.

ELAINE. But I don't want you to. Please! It'll be no use.

CURTIS. We'll see.

ELAINE. John, I . . . (*stopping and smiling suddenly*). Well, anyway, he won't come, so . . .

CURTIS (*fiercely*). Won't he? (*Goes to door and flings it open, calling loudly*) Henri!

HENRI (*below stairs*). Yes, sir?

CURTIS. Tell Mr. Fellowes that if he prefers it I will come down there. (*He turns and closes door.*) Go into the bedroom, dear. (*Indicating window on to the verandah*) The window's open.

ELAINE. If you will see him, I'd rather stay.

CURTIS. I shan't hurt him, don't worry.

ELAINE. I'd rather stay.

CURTIS. All right; only, don't interfere. I've got you into this mess by my confounded idiocy, and I've got to get you out of it. (*There is a knock at the door and he goes over and opens it. ELAINE rises quickly.*) Come in, I want to speak to you.

(*As GERALD enters, ELAINE goes quietly to the Chesterfield and sits there without once looking at him. He looks around doubtfully.*)

CURTIS. Sit down.

GERALD. I don't think I shall have occasion to stay more than a moment.

CURTIS. You may. Sit down. (*Points to chair L. of table.*)

(*GERALD sits L. of table. CURTIS takes the chair on its R.*)

CURTIS (*evenly*). Now, Mister Fellowes, Elaine tells me . . .

GERALD (*with a sneer*). Yes; so I guessed.

CURTIS. What do you mean?

GERALD. It was natural that she should tell her protector that I had dared to make love to her when she found that I would do so no longer.

CURTIS (*amazed at the injustice*). You mean, she told me to make mischief? You infernal blackguard! . . .

(*GERALD rises. CURTIS checks himself.*)

CURTIS. No, no. I beg your pardon. Please sit down again. I didn't ask you up here to quarrel with you. (*GERALD sits again.*)

CURTIS *breathes hard for a moment and then resumes evenly*) She did not tell me with any idea of revenging herself upon you, but because I worried the information out of her. On the contrary, she thinks you were quite, quite justified. This must be very gratifying to you.

GERALD (*lamely*). I am glad that she understands that I could not have acted otherwise. (*He is trying to copy CURTIS'S method of speaking of ELAINE as if she were not present, but cannot help glancing at her occasionally. She never looks round nor meets his eye.*)

CURTIS (*still heroically keeping his temper*). Quite so. She does understand. But—Mister Fellowes—I don't.

GERALD (*disconcerted*). You—er—don't?

CURTIS. No. I don't. Please tell me—why couldn't you have acted otherwise? . . .

GERALD Well—I . . . (*Hesitates.*)

CURTIS. Yes, yes. Go on. I want to get your point of view. I'm quite sure there is something wrong with it, but I can't point out to you where the flaw lies until it is all—er—before me. Tell me why you were willing to run away with Elaine, when you thought she was my wife.

GERALD (*surprised*). Because I loved her.

CURTIS (*pleased at the direct answer*). Good! Now . . . (*continuing the examination*). Why, when you learnt that Elaine was not my wife, did you change your mind?

GERALD (*still more surprised*). Why? I found that the woman I loved was living with you, yet not your wife. Do you think I ever want to see her again—now that I know that?

CURTIS. H'm—yes, I see your point. You think that because Elaine is not my wife, she is not worthy to be your mistress? . . .

GERALD (*very irate*). I never suggested such a thing to her.

CURTIS (*acutely, but without temper*). Didn't you? Under the impression that she was my wife you asked her to go away with you. Until I got a divorce I suppose you'd have lived together as man and wife?

GERALD. We counted upon your getting a divorce.

CURTIS (*insistently*). Yes—but in the meantime . . .

GERALD. Well, even if we had lived together until you got a divorce; isn't there some difference between overruling the accepted laws of morality for love and setting them aside for money?

CURTIS. H'm. (*Quite pleased*) I'm inclined to agree with you there. You've got the right ideas, Mister Fellowes; only, you're young and a little priggish. Well, well. I was, myself, once. Let me tell you that Elaine never wanted to set aside any of the conventions in my case. No. She wanted to marry me for my money like a well-brought-up young lady. Only, unfortunately she was alone and had no one who could ask me my intentions, and generally give me to understand that she was for sale in the orthodox market. She had to conduct her own overtures, and I made the mistake of thinking that she would be content to accept my money without the formality of marrying me.

GERALD. Mistake?

CURTIS. Yes; it was a mistake. She had never thought of anything but marrying me. She was quite horrified when she found out what I had mistaken her for.

GERALD. But she accepted the position.

CURTIS. Yes—she accepted the position because she hadn't got a penny or a friend, and because she felt that—since a poor woman hunting a rich husband and another sort of woman seeking a protector could be so easily mistaken for each other

—the difference between them could not be so great as she had been brought up to believe. She accepted the position.

GERALD. You should not have let her when you found out your mistake.

CURTIS. I didn't find it out until nearly a year afterwards—when we'd begun to be really good friends and she told me. If I had found it out at the time, perhaps, I might have given her some good advice and left her to starve—or find somebody else—in the approved way. I wouldn't have married her. I've always had the notion that where an alliance depends upon money-influence a marriage ceremony is out of place. Upon my word—I'm beginning to think that it is the only time when it's really necessary. I suppose, if I had married her, you and she would now be on your way to some place where you would wait quietly until I got a divorce. Eh?

GERALD. Certainly. If you had married her.

CURTIS. Well, now—since you have my assurance that she *wanted* to marry me, and that it was only my obtuseness in misunderstanding her aim that placed her in this position—don't you think you might take her away and marry her at once instead of waiting for her to be set free?

GERALD (*surprised*). I've already said . . .

CURTIS. Yes, yes. . . . But in view of what I've just told you.

GERALD. What you have told me makes no difference to the situation. You have merely explained how it came about. I am very glad to learn that Elaine is not as bad as I thought—but—I'm still not anxious to take her off your hands.

CURTIS. Take her off my hands? Do you think I want to get rid of her?

GERALD. You seem pretty anxious to.

CURTIS. What? . . . (*His temper has broken through and is now merely seeking expression.*)

ELAINE. John! . . .

CURTIS (*to her*). T'sh, t'sh, my dear, please! Mr. Fellowes, you do me a great injustice. I do not want to get rid of Elaine. She has been my friend for five years, and I had hoped she would remain my friend all her life. Unfortunately she has fallen in love with you. Her happiness depends upon you. Needless to say, her happiness is a very important thing to me. Now—I ask you to please consider her . . .

ELAINE. John!

CURTIS (*to her*). Please, my dear. Mr. Fellowes, you will be very sorry some day that you have behaved so caddishly. . . .

(GERALD *rises.*)

CURTIS. No, no, no—don't go. Look here, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you are so set on respectability, I'll marry Elaine

and then you can elope with her as you originally intended to.

(ELAINE *bursts into a peal of hearty, uncontrollable laughter. They both turn to her. She rises and comes to JOHN'S side, still laughing weakly.*)

ELAINE (*unsteadily*). Oh, John! Don't talk any more nonsense. It's too . . . (*breaking into a laugh again*). You dear, ridiculous John. (*Then to Gerald*) Please go away.

GERALD. I'm—sorry—E . . .

ELAINE. You've nothing to be sorry for. I'm really very grateful to you. . . .

GERALD. Grateful?

ELAINE. Yes. . . . Go away.

(GERALD *crosses to door and exits awkwardly.*)

CURTIS (*after a pause*). You made a mistake to interfere, I think.

ELAINE (*smiling at him*). Why, had you got any more schemes for reconciling us? Oh, John! . . . Would you really have done violence to your feelings and married me for the sake of my particular lover who only elopes with married women?

CURTIS. You'll make yourself hysterical.

ELAINE. No—I won't. (*In changed tone*) John, why did you never tell me that you loved me?

CURTIS. Good Lord! . . . Do you want telling?

ELAINE (*half to herself*). No . . . (*breaking off*). John, I think I'll change my mind and accept your offer of marriage.

CURTIS. Why?

ELAINE (*laughing*). Oh, not to make my next elopement easier. Just for my own benefit, John.

CURTIS. You mean, you *want* to marry me?

ELAINE. Yes, please. For good.

CURTIS (*elated*). Then you weren't as much in love with Fellowes as you thought?

ELAINE (*analytically*). Yes, I was . . . I was very much in love with him. It's funny . . . and I'm not now.

CURTIS (*brusquely*). You can't get over being in love like that.

ELAINE. Yes—you can. When you've got a previous affection to fall back upon.

CURTIS. You are not going to tell me that you've fallen in love with *me* all in five minutes?

ELAINE. No—but I've found it out in two.

(CURTAIN.)

THE MARRIAGE OF COLUMBINE

COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS

CHARACTERS

SCARAMOUCHE, *a Clown of Repute.*

COLUMBINE.

TOMMY, *their Son, aged Six.*

MAY, *their Daughter (does not appear).*

JEANNE, *the Baby (only seen for a moment).*

MR. GEORGE SALAMANDRO, *a Friend of the Family.*

MRS. LA BOLARO, *an aged ex-Bareback Rider.*

ALFRED SCOTT, *a Local Printer.*

JESSIE POOLE, *his Fiancée.*

BOB }
ANNIE } *Servants at The George.*

MRS. JOLLINGS, *a Landlady.*

The Action of the Play takes place in Dunchester, an old and respectable town.

TIME.—*The end of the last century.*



ACT I

SCENE

THE FIRST-FLOOR PRIVATE SITTING-ROOM OF AN OLD INN—THE
GEORGE—AT DUNCHESTER

The walls are papered above the high wainscoting, and adorned with several black old engravings; a portrait of a prize pig in colours, and a couple of stuffed birds in glass cases. At back R. there are double doors leading into bedroom, where the foot of a bed and a large dress-basket are to be seen. At back L. a single door opens on to the large landing—which is very dimly lighted. The left side of the room is at an angle, and includes a very large old style bay-window, through which another wing of the building, an old lamp, and the weather-beaten signboard of the inn can be seen. There are heavy curtains at window. There is a large fireplace with a bright fire burning in it R., a copper kettle on the hob. A large high-backed chair is above fire, a smaller elbow chair out a little and below it. At back, between double and single doors, a solid sideboard. A grandfather clock in L. corner. A small light table and two light chairs in bay-window, and below it a bureau, open and covered with papers. A solid old sofa, and a solid old footstool L.C. R.C. a large round table with a chair above it, and another L. of it. Another chair against wall above fire, and another at bureau. All furniture is heavily Georgtan and well polished, as is the floor around the faded old carpet. There is a bell-rope in R. corner.

ACT I. commences at seven o'clock on a November evening. MRS. LA BOLARO is discovered half-asleep in chair below fire. The stage is full of shadows, being lit only by the fire and a couple of candles on the mantelpiece beside the light from the lamp outside window and a wedge of light which shines through the gap in the folding-doors, behind which COLUMBINE can be heard moving softly about and singing to the baby.

A moment passes in silence, the grandfather clock gives a preliminary whir and commences to strike the hour.

At the eighth stroke MRS. LA BOLARO raises her head and says "Eight!" in a surprised tone. She leans around arm of chair and goes on counting the strokes. "Nine, ten, eleven, twelve!" she counts audibly under her breath. "Thirteen!" She gives a gasp of apprehension. There is a fourteenth whir, but no stroke, instead the weight of the clock falls with a loud crash. MRS. LA BOLARO rises, and going to the bell-rope she gives it a vigorous tug and then stands waiting and watching for someone to answer the bell. She is a feeble, angular, old woman of about sixty-five. Her manners are as bad as they can be, and so is her temper. She is eccentric almost to the verge of madness.

(BOB ENTERS in response to the bell. He is carrying the lamp.)

BOB. You rang for the light, 'm? *(Places lamp on sideboard.)*

MRS. LA B. No, I didn't. Look at that thing. *(Points to clock.)*

BOB *(obeying)*. Yes'm. *(Goes to clock.)* It's stopped.

MRS. LA B. Stopped! I should hope so. It struck thirteen. What does that mean?

BOB. Something wrong with it. *(Opens offending clock and examines it more closely.)*

(MRS. LA B. snorts indignantly and returns to fire.)

You're never superstitious, 'm.

MRS. LA B. Yes, I am. You told me I could rely upon that clock.

BOB *(coming centre)*. I did, 'm?

MRS. LA B. Yes, you did.

BOB. I don't rekerlect . . . *(Centre.)*

MRS. LA B. On a Thursday morning—when I was still somebody—to meet the Prince by train—I suppose you remember the Prince?

BOB *(agreeably)*. Yes'm. But that was a long time ago.

MRS. LA B. Not so long. *(Pats up cushions in chair. Sits upstage chair.)*

BOB. Will you have tea as soon as Mr. Scaramouche comes in, 'm?

MRS. LA B. I suppose so. What's the time?

BOB. Just struck seven, 'm?

MRS. LA B. *(gloomily)*. Just struck thirteen. *(Sits.)*

BOB. Yes'm. . . . It was seven when it *done* that. *(Goes to door, hesitates, and turns back to MRS. LA B.)* Er—Mr. Salamandro's downstairs, 'm.

MRS. LA B. Let him stop there.

BOB. I've been trying to p'suade him to step up, 'm.

MRS. LA B. *(under her breath)*. Yes, you would.

BOB. Shall I ask him in, 'm? Mr. Scaramouche doesn't like his guests to be kept waiting in the bar, 'm.

MRS. LA B. *(with scorn)*. His guests!

BOB *(briskly)*. Thank you, 'm.

(He exits rapidly, closes door, reopens it immediately, and ushers in MR. GEORGE SALAMANDRO, who has obviously been waiting on the mat. MRS. LA B. has reseated herself and keeps her back resolutely to the visitor. BOB rapidly draws the curtains and exits, leaving SALAMANDRO standing awkwardly near the door cracking his knuckles and fingering his hat. He is a tall, very lean man of about fifty or a little more. He wears a very seedy blue serge suit, which hangs loosely on his big bones. His collar is amazingly high and his tie amazingly skimpy. His manner is shy and nervous, but—when put at his ease—he can be a pleasant, though rather odd, individual. He at last ventures to say something.)

GEORGE. Er—evening.

MRS. LA B. *(turning and eyeing him unfavourably before speaking).* Well, what do you want?

GEORGE. I—just drop't in to see . . . *(Looks hopelessly around.)*

MRS. LA B. To see if anyone would ask you to stay to tea, eh?

(Enter ANNIE. Lays cloth.)

GEORGE *(looking at the table in surprise).* What? Haven't you had tea yet? *(Comes down L.C.)*

MRS. LA B. No, we haven't, and well you know it. Do you ever turn up after a meal? Not you.

(Enter BOB with tray. They proceed to lay table in a fine professional manner. BOB lays place from sideboard.)

GEORGE. I'm sure I'm always made so welcome—that is, the Great Man and Columbine made me so welcome—that I scarcely realise how often I do call.

MRS. LA B. *(acidly).* Oh, that's it, is it? I was wondering . . .

COLUMBINE *(calling from inner room).* Who are you talking to, Barley?

MRS. LA B. *(under her breath).* Who do you think?

(COLUMBINE opens one of the folding-doors and stands just inside holding the baby in her arms.)

COL. *(pleasantly to GEORGE).* Good evening, George. I thought you'd drop in.

MRS. LA B. So did I.

COL. *(to BOB).* Mr. Salamandro will stay to tea, Bob. Please lay a place for him.

BOB *(proudly).* I have, 'm.

COL. That's right.

GEORGE. It looks rather as if I was always here, doesn't it?

MRS. LA B. It does.

COL. Don't be horrid, Barley. No, of course it doesn't, George.

GEORGE (*with a shy laugh*). Well—Bob seems to lay a place for me without being told to.

(ANNIE is just going out, followed by BOB. He pauses and addresses GEORGE from the door.)

BOB. I understood from Mrs. La Bolaro that you was going to stay, sir. (*Goes out rapidly and closes door, leaving MRS. LA B. speechless with rage.*)

GEORGE (*to MRS. LA B.*). It's awfully good of you—but, really—aren't I rather in the way sometimes?

MRS. LA B. Ha! (*Sits.*)

COL. Of course not. We're very glad to see you.

MRS. LA B. Are we? Who's *we*, I should like to know?

COL. (*with dignity*). Baby and I.

GEORGE (*greatly pleased*). Good egg! How's the wee lassie?
(*Goes to COLUMBINE'S side and endeavours to peep at the baby's face.*)

COL. Sh! Don't disturb her. She's only just asleep. I'll put her down, and then I'll come and talk to you until tea.

GEORGE. But, really, I don't think I ought to—

COL. (*interrupting him with a squeal of pretended impatience*). Don't be silly, George! Don't you always have tea with us?

(*Goes into bedroom and closes door.*)

MRS. LA B. (*bursting with exasperation*). Yes, you do! Every day of your life! I believe you go without your dinner to save room for the teas you get here.

(GEORGE laughs awkwardly and tries to protest.)

You're never out of the place. Who invited you to-day, I should like to know?

GEORGE. Well—er—you know—the Great Man said—"drop in whenever you like"—and—and . . .

(COLUMBINE returns from other room without the baby, talking as she enters.)

COL. Of course, George. And we're very glad you like to so often. It's very kind of you. It shows you like us.

MRS. LA B. It shows you like our teas.

COL. (*severely*). Now, Barley, I won't have you saying such things to poor George. Come to the fire, George. (*She crosses and picks up stool from below sofa.*) Sit still, Barley. I just want to prop the door open in case baby wakes.

(GEORGE gets as far as the hearthrug and stands there uncomfortably looking at MRS. LA B., who, after glaring at him fiercely, makes a move to rise. COLUMBINE is up by door by this time propping it open.)

MRS. LA B. (*not noticing the remark and still glaring at GEORGE*). If you want my chair, Mr. Salamandro (*rises and steps aside with a theatrical gesture*)—pray take it.

GEORGE (*very disconcerted*). Oh no—no. I'll . . .

MRS. LA B. Pray do not hesitate. I am going to my room. (*Moves even farther away from chair.*)

GEORGE. Oh well, if you are really . . . (*Sits in chair she has just vacated.*)

MRS. LA B. (*after regarding him furiously for a moment*). And that's a gentleman! Great heavens!

(*Exits severely by single door.*)

(*GEORGE looks very uncomfortable, but COLUMBINE pays no attention. She comes to table and sits in large chair, smiling pleasantly at GEORGE. She is a pretty, fair, slight girl; grave, dignified, and quaintly matronly. She is strikingly simple and direct in her manner.*)

GEORGE. I'm afraid Mrs. La Bolaro didn't mean me to take her chair.

COL. Oh, Barley's awful this week. The only thing to do is not to notice her temper.

GEORGE (*a little doubtfully*). Yes—yes. Quite so. Great Man out?

COL. (*nodding*). He'll be in presently.

GEORGE. Tommy well?

COL. Yes, thank you.

GEORGE. May?

(*COLUMBINE nods.*)

And the new arrival?

COL. They're all very well, thank you, George.

GEORGE. Good egg! (*Gazes abstractedly into fire.*)

COL. Well, haven't you got any news to tell me?

GEORGE. No—er—nothing fresh. Tickets going strong for the Great Man's night, I hear.

COL. Are they? I'm glad. He hasn't told me much about it. Friday night, isn't it to be?

(*GEORGE nods.*)

I shall come.

GEORGE. Shall you? Good egg. 'Tisn't often we see you at the show. Are the youngsters coming too?

COL. Now, George, you *know* that Scarry *never* allows Tommy or May to see him in the ring.

GEORGE (*abashed*). No . . . I know. I thought perhaps on his own night . . .

COL. What difference would that make? You know he says he would never be able to look Tommy in the face again if the boy had seen him tumbling over his own hat and getting his

face covered with pastry. Tommy would lose all respect for him, and he says that a boy who doesn't respect his father can't possibly respect himself.

GEORGE. Yes. Queer idea. Still, I dare say he's right.

COL. I'm certain he's right.

GEORGE. He's a great man.

COL. He's a very great man.

GEORGE. By Jove, he's popular here, too. The place 'll be packed out on Friday. The firm are breaking themselves over the printing. They're handing out throwaways now. I've been round with a pocketful myself, leaving a few in every bar in the town.

COL. Wasn't that very expensive? (*Holds face up to lamp, threading needle.*)

GEORGE. No, I only asked the time at most.

(COLUMBINE, *after trimming lamp, has sat down above table with the light full on her face. GEORGE looks at her closely.*)

I say, young lady, you look tired.

COL. Do I? Yes, I'm generally tired about this time—after I've got all the babies to bed.

GEORGE. They're a lot of trouble.

COL. (*cheerfully*). Oh yes. But I have a lot of time to rest in the evenings while you are all at the show.

GEORGE. What do you do with yourself? Read?

COL. (*shaking her head*). Scarry says I ought to, but I *can't*! Reading makes me tireder than anything. I'm not a bit fond of reading, really, you know. I think I hate it. Isn't that dreadful? I suppose I can't read properly, and *that's* why. The long words all look so silly. . . . I sew, or I talk to the landlady if she's a nice one. Barley goes to bed early, thank goodness. Most of the time I just sit and think.

GEORGE. Sit and think? Don't you ever get a bit humpy?

COL. Humpy? No, what have I got to get humpy about?

GEORGE. I don't know, but—well, if I spent a whole evening sitting by a fire and thinking I'd feel like cutting my throat by the end of it.

COL. (*amused and interested*). Would you? How funny! No, I've never minded.

GEORGE. Glad to hear it. What do you find to think about?

COL. Oh, Scarry . . .

GEORGE. The Great Man? Yes, that goes without saying. You can't think about him all the time, though.

COL. No, I think about lots of things. What the next rooms will be like, and what we shall have for dinner to-morrow. And—of course—the babies.

GEORGE. Of course. Well, perhaps if I . . . Ah, you're like the young bear, Columbine. All your troubles are before you.

(Enter BOB with dishes on tray, puts tray on sideboard, and puts chair to R. table.)

COL. *(rises and puts basket on sideboard)*. Has Mr. Scaramouche come in yet, Bob?

BOB. Downstairs in the private bar now, 'm *(bringing pie down stage of table)*. Talking to Mr. Scott from the printers.

(GEORGE rises at sight of food.)

GEORGE *(watching BOB place dishes on table)*. What . . . er . . . ?

COL. *(laughing at him)*. Yes, what's for tea, Bob?

(Bringing down haddock and plates.)

BOB. A 'addick, a apple pie, buttered toast, rarsberry jam, and water cress.

GEORGE. Good egg!

COL. Hungry, George?

GEORGE. Well—yes—I am a bit hungry. It's odd.

(BOB opens door to exit but draws back to admit SCARAMOUCHE, who is heard outside speaking to SCOTT. He enters, followed by that gentleman, who, however, will come no farther than the door.)

SCARA. Columbine, my dear, may I introduce a gentleman? Please come in, Mr. Scott.

(SCOTT comes a little more into room and stands bowing.)

Mr. Scott, my dear.

SCOTT. Happy to meet you.

SCARA. Mr. Scott is proprietor of a local paper—er *(to SCOTT)*—the *Argus*? The *Argus*, my dear.

(BOB assists SCARAMOUCHE off with his greatcoat, which is very heavy, while SCOTT shakes hands with COLUMBINE.)

SCOTT. Happy to meet you, Mrs. Scaramouche. Quite well?

COL. Yes, thank you. *(She is very shy and reserved with strangers.)*

(BOB exits with SCARAMOUCHE'S coat.)

SCARA. *(crossing to GEORGE, who has risen)*. Ah, George. *(Shakes hands.)* Dropt in to tea? That's right. Er—Mr. Scott—Mr. Salamandro; an old member of our aggregation and a very old friend of mine.

SCOTT *(shaking hands with GEORGE)*. Happy to meet you. Quite well?

(SCARAMOUCHE takes up an important position on hearthrug facing the others. He is a plump, pleasant, and pompous little man with the customary dignity and self-respect of a

professional funny man in private life. He is forty-five years of age, and his short hair is grizzled. His clothes are good but not fashionable; he wears a heavy gold watch-chain, a large cameo pin in a very full cravat, and his hands are smooth and white.)

SCARA. . . . Sit down, Mr. Scott. Well, George, Columbine been entertaining you? And Mrs. La Bolaro?

(GEORGE ambles round to L. of table, taking chair to R. off corner.)

GEORGE *(inspecting the jam)*. Eh?—Oh yes, yes, thanks.

SCARA. Especially the old lady, eh? Yes, yes, I know. Well, we mustn't mind her little ways. Please sit down, Mr. Scott.

(SCOTT sits on sofa, hat at his feet.)

This is a bit better than the bar, eh?

SCOTT. I'm sure I had no preference for the bar.

SCARA. No, no, of course not. You'll excuse us if we talk business, George? Nothing private. Mr. Scott wants to interview me for his paper.

(GEORGE places a chair R. of table and sits—ready for the meal whenever the business shall be over. COLUMBINE looks up; she is at sideboard.)

COL. Oh, shall you be long? Tea, you know.

SCARA. Just ten minutes, my dear.

COL. *(warningly)*. It's very late. We were waiting for you. It's a quarter past seven.

SCARA. Eh? *(Looks at watch.)* Why, so it is—I thought . . . *(Looks at clock.)*

COL. Oh, that's stopped.

SCARA. Dear, dear, dear. Yes, we must have tea at once.

(COLUMBINE rings bell.)

I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Scott. I find I shall only just have time to eat my tea and bolt. I'm afraid I've dragged you up here for nothing. Really, I am most awfully sorry.

SCOTT *(rising)*. Oh, don't mention it.

SCARA. *(making him sit down again)*. No, no, no; I'll tell you what: You stay and interview Columbine in my place. She'll be glad of someone to talk to, and she can tell you as much about my—ah—professional career as I can myself. Can't you, my dear?

COL. *(cutting bread and butter)*. What's that?

SCARA. Tell Mr. Scott a whole lot about me for his paper? Of course you can. I suppose you've had tea, Mister Scott?

SCOTT. Oh, yes.

SCARA. Long ago, eh? Have another cup with us.

SCOTT. No, no, thank you.

SCARA. Well, wait and chat to us while we have ours, then.

SCOTT (*bashfully*). Oh, er—shan't I be—rather . . .

SCARA. No, no, no, not at all. Stay and see the lions feed.

(ANNIE brings in the last of the tea-things, hot and steaming.)

COL. (*helping to put them in their places*). Did you notice if the babies were all asleep, Annie?

ANNIE. I think they are, mum.

COL. Did you look?

ANNIE. I will, mum, as I pass the door.

COL. No, don't bother; I'll go. I won't be a minute, Scarry. I must just . . .

SCARA. Go and count up the chicks, eh? Good girl.

(COLUMBINE goes out.)

Aha, Annie! No use trying to put that little mother off with "I think so, mum."

ANNIE. No, sir; but I really do think they are all right.

SCARA. Of course they are. The young lady likes to see for herself, though.

GEORGE. Eye like an eagle where those babies are concerned.

SCOTT. Have you many children, Mister Scaramouche?

SCARA. Three.

SCOTT. I suppose you hope to make some sort of use of them in the circus when they're old enough?

SCARA. No, I hadn't thought of it.

SCOTT. Oh, I was under the impression that circus folk were in the habit of teaching their children—er—splits and that sort of thing from their earliest infancy.

SCARA. Were you really? I can see Columbine allowing her blessed babies to be "turned out," eh, George?

SCOTT. Mrs. Scaramouche looks very young to be the mother of three children—but perhaps they aren't her own?

SCARA. Oh, but they are!

SCOTT. Really! But she looks—well—quite a child herself.

SCARA. It's a favourite remark of mine, Mister Scott, that children often make the best mothers.

GEORGE. Right, too! Good egg!

SCOTT. I suppose she spoils them fearfully.

SCARA. Not more than is good for them, I think.

SCOTT. What I mean is: So young a woman can't possibly have the—firmness—to deal with children.

GEORGE (*very indignantly*). Can't she, indeed?

SCOTT. Well, children are rather a handful. I had a little brother—he died—well, he led mother no end of a dance, and *she* was a woman of great firmness and experience.

SCARA. I don't think firmness and experience are everything, Mister Scott. Columbine gets on pretty well, and, as you say, she's a mere child herself.

GEORGE. She hasn't aged a day since Tommy was born. She was a child then—she's a child now.

SCARA. Yes, yes. She was a pale child then, though. Domestic revelations, eh, Mr. Scott? (*Crosses to Scott.*) Oh, that reminds me. Of course you'll confine your interview with me to purely public matters. Your readers don't want to know what I have for breakfast, and all that sort of thing.

SCOTT. Oh! I thought that was exactly what they did want to know.

SCARA. No, no, no. It's a great mistake. Robs our business of half its attraction. Dulls its glamour, you know.

(MRS. LA B. *returns.*)

Come along, ma! Let me introduce Mister Scott to you.

Mister Scott—Mrs. La Bolaro. (*Takes chair above table.*)

MRS. LA B. (*peering into SCOTT's face.*) Scott? Not the Canonball King.

SCARA. No. Mr. Scott is not in the business.

MRS. LA B. Oh! (*Goes to fire and gets chair.*)

(COLUMBINE *returns to above table.*)

SCARA. Well, my dear? All correct? (*Crosses to COLUMBINE.*) None of them missing?

COL. Scarry!

SCARA. We shall have to institute a roll-call for them when Jeanne is a bit older.

COL. (*behind GEORGE tilting him out of his chair.*) Move, George, unless you are going to pour out tea for me.

(GEORGE *goes round and takes chair from sideboard and places L. of table.* MRS. LA B. *turns smaller arm-chair from fire to lower R. of table and sits.* COLUMBINE *sits in chair just vacated by GEORGE and pours out tea while SCARRY helps to the fish.* SCOTT, *seated on sofa, feels very out of his element. He is an exceptionally ordinary young man, with a slight moustache, brown boots, an earnest manner, a common accent, and a moral nature.*)

SCARA. There, sit down and sail into that, George. (*Hands GEORGE haddock.* MRS. LA B. *snatches it.* Scarry *gives another.*) The old mongary, eh?

GEORGE.. Aha! The old mongary chat!

(SCOTT *has his doubts about the meaning of these remarks.*)

COL. Won't Mister Scott have a cup, Scarry?

SCOTT. No. No, thank you.

SCARA. No, my dear. I suppose you think this an outlandish time to be having tea, Mister Scott?

SCOTT. Oh, not at all! I know you people who are always travelling about must be bound to have your meals at all hours.

SCARA. Oh, we aren't *always* travelling about. We keep still sometimes. We shall be here for a fortnight, you know.

SCOTT. Yes, but you never have a home.

MRS. LA B. (*with great fervour*). No, thank God!

SCARA. Why, Ma! What's your objection to home life?

MRS. LA B. Waiting on *men*.

SCARA. Ah, Ma's a thorough Bohemian!

SCOTT. It must be very bad for you, being always on the move.

SCARA. Bad for us? How?

SCOTT. Not for your health, perhaps. I meant more for your moral welfare.

SCARA. Indeed? Really, I don't quite see how travelling should affect our *moral* welfare.

SCOTT. Well—living in lodgings as you do, you haven't the responsibilities of anyone who's a fixture.

SCARA. Haven't we?

COL. Children are a *great* responsibility, Mister Scott.

SCOTT. Yes . . . I don't so much mean that sort of responsibility, Missis Scaramouche.

COL. (*taking no further interest*). More tea, George?

GEORGE. Ay, ay!

SCOTT (*anxious to continue*). I mean more . . .

COL. Pass your cup, then. (*GEORGE does so*.)

SCOTT. What I mean . . .

SCARA. And more fish, eh? (*Gives GEORGE fish*.) What sort of responsibility do you mean, then, Mister Scott?

SCOTT (*laboriously*). Well, perhaps "responsibility" is not quite the right word. I mean—knowing you're going to leave a town in a few days must make you—well—not so careful of what you do in that town. Anyone who spends his whole life in one place gets to be known, and has a certain amount of appearance to keep up. Now, you—haven't got—the same reasons to—er . . .

SCARA. Keep to the narrow path, eh?

SCOTT. Oh, well—that . . .

SCARA. Because we have no neighbours to keep an eye on us?

SCOTT. Oh, I'm not referring to you personally, Mister Scaramouche. Present company always excepted, you know. *You* are known everywhere you go.

SCARA. I must be an absolute paragon of virtue, then, according to your argument.

SCOTT. No, no; really, I wasn't in any way meaning you. But you must admit—well—the rank and file . . .

SCARA. I'm afraid you're a little narrow-minded, Mister Scott.

SCOTT. Oh no, indeed. I'm often called most *broad-minded*. Several people were against letting the hall to a circus, you know.

SCARA. So I heard.

SCOTT. Well, I threw the whole weight of the *Argus* against them. I said that the world was big enough for good and bad, and the circus would only be here a fortnight, and, after all, our townsfolk could do with a little amusement. Besides which, if we refused the hall, they'd take a plot of land from a private owner.

SCARA. Most convincing.

MRS. LA B. (*suddenly, but with conviction*). The man's a fool!

SCARA. Ma—Ma, really!

COL. Barley! Don't be so rude.

MRS. LA B. Well, he talks like one.

SCARA (*amused, but trying to be severe*). Ma, you must not. I must apologise for Missis La Bolaro, Mister Scott. She is very outspoken. (*Nods significantly to SCOTT.*) A little too much so, in fact.

MRS. LA B. (*looking SCOTT fairly in the eye*). Well, I suppose I may say what I think?

SCOTT (*absolutely nonplussed*). Oh, by *all* means! Certainly. No offence.

SCARA. You're very kind.

COL. More tea, George?

GEORGE. Ay, ay. (*Passes cup.*)

SCARA. Please go on with what you were saying, Mister Scott.

SCOTT (*with sincerity*). Oh, I'd *quite* finished, thanks.

SCARA. You'll have some more fish, George?

GEORGE. No more, thanks.

SCARA. Sail into the apple-pie, then. Help yourself.

GEORGE (*obeying*). Good egg!

COL. Have you been to the circus yet, Mister Scott?

SCOTT. No, Missis Scaramouche, I haven't. I have very little time for amusements of that sort. I'm told (*with a little bow*) that Mister Scaramouche is very laughable.

(GEORGE *chokes*, and SCARAMOUCHE *looks extremely severe.*)

I suppose you often are at the performances, Missis Scaramouche?

SCARA. No—Columbine very rarely comes near the show.

SCOTT (*with an air of perfect understanding*). Oh yes. I see. Most proper.

SCARA. You know, Mister Scott, I didn't know until to-day that you were a newspaper proprietor.

SCOTT. No? I haven't had the *Argus* long.

SCARA. I hope you are doing well with it?

SCOTT. Fairly. I took it over from the last owners as part payment of their bill for printing.

SCARA. That doesn't sound as if they managed to make a very good thing out of it.

SCOTT. Well, no, they didn't. They were these literary sort of

people. I daresay they'd have done all right if they'd had someone over them. I've been improving it as much as I could. Of course, I'm not hampered with having to pay printer's bills, which is a great saving. I'm known here, too. That's a help. And I hope to incorporate a little magazine I now print for my chapel in with the *Argus*.

SCARA. Good idea!

SCOTT. Yes. I've been trying to pave the way by raising the paper's moral tone as much as I could without interfering with the circulation. It's hard to tell just how much the public will stand of that sort of thing, you know.

SCARA. I suppose so.

SCOTT. Oh, but they'll like this interview with you. I hope to make that something of a scoop. It's very kind of you to allow me.

SCARA. Not at all. You have been most accommodating over the printing, I am pleased to be able to oblige you. I only hope you will not be disappointed.

MRS. LA B. (*who has been silently watching GEORGE devouring apple-pie*). Just look at that man eat!

SCARA. Ma! Ma!

* (*GEORGE drops his knife and fork and stares at the lady in amazement.*)

MRS. LA B. The human ostrich isn't in it!

SCARA. Manners, Ma—manners!

COL. That's the second time you've been rude to poor George in one day.

MRS. LA B. Poor George, indeed! When the man comes and eats us out of house and home.

SCARA. (*quietly*). Now, Ma, I won't have that. George is as welcome here as you are. It is nothing to do with you how often he calls, or how much he eats.

MRS. LA B. Nothing to do with me! No! I'm only doing my best to save you from being reduced to beggary. . . .

SCARA. Ma, you're talking nonsense.

MRS. LA B. (*rising*). Talking nonsense, am I? Thank you! If that is your gratitude when I try to protect you from a—hyena!

(*GEORGE, who has absently taken up a morsel, drops it again.*)

MRS. LA BOLARO goes out, banging the door behind her.)

SCARA. There, George! There's a new name for you. Really, my dear, Ma is getting worse and worse. She was most rude to Mister Scott, too.

SCOTT. Oh, don't mention it.

SCARA. No, no. Of course, you understand that she isn't quite responsible.

SCOTT. Then, wouldn't she be better—somewhere safe?

SCARA. Oh no. There's really no harm in her. She's had a hard life.

COL. You say that of everyone.

SCARA. Do I, my dear? Well, it's true of most. Poor Barley! This nonsense about being reduced to beggary is worse than the Prince.

COL. She's been talking about him a lot this week.

GEORGE. The Prince? Yes, she met him here.

SCARA. Poor old Ma!

SCOTT (*bursting with curiosity*). The—er—Prince? A—er—hallucination?

SCARA. Well, more or less. She had a—suitor, years ago, as you can guess. A man of position—not a Prince, of course—eldest son of an ex-mayor, I believe. Poor Barley! it's hard to think of her as a fascinator now, eh, George?

SCOTT. And this fellow—I suppose she thinks now that he *was* a Prince?

SCARA. Yes. He's been rising in rank steadily. He was My Lord for some time, then he was The Duke. He'll be an Emperor if she lives long enough.

COL. (*trying to listen*). I hope she hasn't wakened the babies, banging the door like that. I thought I heard . . .

SCARA. Sit still, my dear; they're all right. We should know it if they called.

COL. Not with the door shut.

SCOTT (*rising and going up*). Allow me. (*Opens door wide.*)

(TOMMY is heard calling with great vigour, "Mama, Mama!")

COL. (*in the tone of one contemplating a national catastrophe*). There!

SCARA. Don't answer him, my dear. He must learn that he cannot call for you whenever he pleases. He will go to sleep again if he gets no answer.

TOMMY (*calling with increased determination*). Mama! Is farver in?

(SCARAMOUCHE holds up one finger admonishing silence.)

You—said if I woked up—when farver came in—I could get up and have tea with you.

SCARA. Did you, my dear? Of course if you did we mustn't deceive the little man.

COL. I only said I'd see what you had to say.

SCARA. Oh!

(TOMMY calls again, "Mama.")

(To COLUMBINE) Hush. (*Calls severely*) Be quiet, Tommy.

TOMMY (*jubilantly*). Hullo, Farver!

SCARA (*rising with dignity*). I'll just go and speak to him; perhaps he will keep quiet then.

TOMMY. I say—Farver.

(SCARAMOUCHE *exits and closes door*. SCOTT *returns to sofa*.)

COL. It is a shame that Scarry should be bothered with the children, but really I can't make Tommy mind.

SCOTT. Ah, perhaps you spoil him. Boys soon find out who they can get round.

COL. I'm afraid I do; but Scarry's splendid. He can make him do anything.

SCOTT. Yes, a youngster needs a father's hand to keep him in order. A mother—unless she's very strong-minded—hasn't the heart to punish—

COL. Oh, Scarry doesn't have to *punish* Tommy. He does as he's told without that. Scarry only has to speak . . .

(SCARAMOUCHE *returns proudly carrying TOMMY, who has a large overcoat on over his night-shirt*.)

SCARA. (*reproachfully to COLUMBINE*). My dear, the little chap was hungry. No wonder he called. You can't expect him to go to sleep when he's hungry.

GEORGE (*turns to SCARRY C.*) Good morning, Tommy.

TOMMY (*grinning*). 'Tish't morning.

SCARA. A fine boy, eh, Mister Scott?

SCOTT. Yes indeed. How old might you be, my little man?

SCARA. (*answering for his son*). Six. (*Crosses to above table. Sits down in his place, holding TOMMY on his knee.*) There now! What do you think you'd like? (*GEORGE pulls chair back to C.*)

TOMMY (*pointing at covered dish*). What's that?

SCARA. Haddock. Can he have haddock, my dear?

TOMMY (*still exploring table*). What's *that*?

SCARA. (*lifting cover*). Toast. What do you think you'd like?

(TOMMY *selects a large lump of sugar and places it in his mouth*.)

There's a sweet tooth! My dear, I must be going. Come along, George. (*Rises and puts TOMMY on chair.*) I leave you in good hands, Mister Scott. (*Goes off at door and fetches coat, talking all the time.*) Columbine can tell you anything you want to know, and Missis La Bolaro won't disturb you again to-night after that show of temper.

SCOTT. Won't she be coming back in here?

SCARA. No. So don't be afraid.

(SCARAMOUCHE *goes to glass over fire to arrange his muffler*.)

GEORGE *passes in front of SCOTT to fetch his hat from bureau*. SCOTT *whispers to him seriously*. GEORGE *comes down below sofa to SCOTT*.)

SCOTT. Er—do I understand that he means me to stay here alone with Missis Scaramouche?

GEORGE. Eh? I suppose so. (*Goes round to COLUMBINE and shakes hands with her.*) Good-night, Columbine. A very nice tea—as usual—thank you.

COL. We're always glad to see you—aren't we, Scarry?

SCARA. Of course. Drop in again soon.

GEORGE. Well, if I may . . .

SCARA. To-morrow then. And mind you don't disappoint us.

COL. Wouldn't you like to kiss Tommy good-night?

GEORGE. I'd a good deal rather kiss Tommy's mother good-night. (*Kisses COLUMBINE gently on cheek. SCOTT is horrified.*) Bless you, my dear.

SCARA. (*without looking round from glass*). George, George! You're getting on.

GEORGE. Good gracious me, Tommy, he saw me! Do you think he'll challenge me? Shall I stab him in the back now to avoid any unpleasantness? (*Brandishes table-knife. TOMMY is greatly amused.*)

SCARA. (*crossing to SCOTT above table and shaking hands with him*). Good-night, Mister Scott. I suppose you'll be gone by the time I get back?

SCOTT (*emphatically*). Oh yes. Yes.

SCARA. Columbine, my dear, you understand that you are to tell Mister Scott anything he may want to know. 'Bye, Tommy.

(SCARAMOUCHE and GEORGE go out.)

TOMMY (*calling after them*). 'Bye! Good luck!

SCARA. (*calling back as he goes down stairs*). Thank you, sir, I don't think. . . . (*His voice dies away.*)

COL. (*putting TOMMY down and ringing bell*). If you'll excuse me, Mister Scott, I'll put Tommy back to bed, and then I'll come and talk to you.

SCOTT. Oh, thanks. Won't you come and say good-bye to me, my little man?

(COLUMBINE is putting away a few things in sideboard.)

TOMMY (*coming to SCOTT*). Good-night.

SCOTT. Let's see what I've got here. (*Produces money from pocket.*) There, now what'll you say if . . .

(TOMMY looks doubtfully at COLUMBINE.)

COL. Oh, please—they're never allowed to accept money—I do hope you don't mind.

(Enter BOB with tray.)

BOB. To clear, 'm?

COL. Please. (*Crosses below table.*) Come along, Tommy.

(BOB places tray on sideboard, places cups on tray and plate on table and cruet, butter, and jam in sideboard.)

SCOTT (*detaining TOMMY*). Won't you give me a kiss? (*Kisses TOMMY loudly on the ear.*) There's a brave little man. Run to mummy.

(COLUMBINE *leads TOMMY off.*)

(ANNIE *enters to above table and gathers four apple-pie plates together and assists BOB to clear table. SCOTT goes to mantelpiece and inspects the array of photos and postcards thereon. He does not approve of the majority of them, but leaves none unexamined. Then he turns and watches BOB and ANNIE with his back to the fire.*)

(ANNIE *places pie plates and haddock plates on tray.*)

SCOTT. Queer sort of people, these circus folk, Robert.

(BOB *places tray on sideboard.*)

BOB. Not much dif'rent to others, I don't think, sir. They Bob-old-man's us and Annie-my-dear's us a bit more than some perhaps.

(ANNIE *places tea-tray on sideboard and takes off cloth while BOB holds lamp.*)

SCOTT. Yes, yes. Very familiar in their manners.

BOB. No, sir, not *very*, sir. Mister Scaramouche, he wants respek and he gets it too. He has his pride.

SCOTT. There are different sorts of pride, of course. So they call Annie "my dear," eh? Well, it doesn't do to mind these little things too much, Annie.

ANNIE. No, indeed, sir. I like 'em.

(ANNIE *goes up, takes tea-tray and cloth off. BOB puts things in sideboard and arranges chairs.*)

BOB. I know I'm always glad to see 'em back. Miss Columbine is as nice a young lady as you'd wish to see.

SCOTT. Yes, yes. So it appears.

(ANNIE and BOB *exit with things on tray.*)

(COLUMBINE *returns and goes to big chair.*)

COL. Now, Mister Scott.

(SCOTT *crosses to table.*)

Won't you come to the fire?

SCOTT. I prefer to sit at the table—for writing, you see. (*Produces large notebook and stylo and sits L. of table, drawing in his chair and facing COLUMBINE.*)

COL. Are you going to write down everything I say?

SCOTT. Oh no. I shall only make notes.

COL. You'll have to tell me anything you want to know.

SCOTT. Oh, it's not very important what you tell me—I can work it up into something good at the office.

COL. Oh! (*Pauses in thought.*)

SCOTT (*watching her*). Do you know—it's nothing to do with business—I was thinking I might bring my fiancée up here to see you one of these days. Wouldn't you like to meet her?

COL. (*not quite understanding*). Yes—very much—your . . . ?

SCOTT. My fiancée. Didn't I tell you I was engaged?

COL. Oh, I didn't understand quite what you said. Yes, I shall be pleased to see her.

SCOTT (*compassionately*). I suppose you haven't many friends.

COL. Oh, yes. Quite a lot. Scarry, and George, and—(*laughs*)—Barley when she's in a good temper.

SCOTT. Ah, but I mean *girl* friends—about your own age.

COL. (*without interest*). No.

SCOTT (*discouraged*). Well, suppose we get to business.

COL. Very well.

SCOTT. It's not too easy making a start, is it?

COL. No, Scarry's done such an awful lot.

SCOTT. He's a very clever man.

COL. He's a very *great* man.

SCOTT. It's easy to see you think a lot of him.

COL. Oh, but it isn't only me that does. George just calls him the Great Man, and everybody understands who he means. He really is awfully clever. He can speak six languages, you know.

SCOTT (*surprised*). No, really?

COL. Yes, and he plays the piano and the violin, and he never went to school in his life. He ran away to a circus before he was seven, and one of the clowns taught him to tumble, and he worked very hard, and at last he got a job with a big Russian circus that toured about all over Europe.

SCOTT. Oh, that's where he picked up so many languages.

COL. Yes, but languages aren't so easy to pick up.

SCOTT. No, I suppose not. Was he long with that circus?

COL. Nearly twenty years, and he went everywhere with it and saw all sorts of places. They travelled by caravan, and he can tell the most interesting stories about it. They went right into Persia even. The circus broke up at last, and Scarry went to America.

SCOTT. He would be about twenty-seven then?

COL. Yes—he made a lot of money there. You can make money very quickly in America, Mister Scott.

SCOTT. So I've heard. It must be a very dangerous place for an Englishman.

COL. But when he came back he lost it all over an eating-shop for foreign sailors that he tried to start at Cardiff.

SCOTT. Lost all his money?

COL. Yes, and then he started as a clown again in circuses and sometimes in music-halls. You know those big music-hall places in London and Moscow, and those big towns?

SCOTT. Er—no—I've heard of them.

COL. Well, they pay much better than circuses, and Scarry works them when he isn't with Gilbeys'—and—well, that's all!

SCOTT (*consulting his notebook in a slightly dazed condition*). Yes—thank you very much. I'd no idea.

COL. (*very pleased*). It is a lot, isn't it? I told you he'd done an awful lot, though.

SCOTT. Yes. It's easy to see he's quite an exceptional person. After all, foreign travel does give a sort of artificial polish to a man, doesn't it? Now, what I want—if you can tell it me—is some interesting anecdote . . .

COL. (*doubtfully*). An anecdote? What's that?

SCOTT. Something that might have happened to him. This is only an outline, after all. Let's see . . . (*Thinks*.) Now how did you first come to meet Mister Scaramouche? A touch of the romance of real life can be made most effective provided it's not overdone.

COL. It was at Hull.

SCOTT (*making note*). At Hull.

COL. Yes, I was in a troupe there.

SCOTT. Oh, I didn't know you were ever in the business.

COL. Didn't you? Yes. A boy and I used to do a trick dancing act as Harlequin and Columbine.

SCOTT. Oh, that's where you get your name!

COL. Of course. Where else could I get it? We lived with an old man called Quarnelli. He used to teach us, and his own little boy used to be the clown. We were called "Quarnelli's Juvenile Harlequinade."

SCOTT. Juvenile? How old were you then?

COL. When we were at Hull? Oh, about fifteen or sixteen. I wasn't well. Have you ever had influenza?

SCOTT. Yes.

COL. You know how it makes you want to lie down and go to sleep? Well, one night I was like that, and Quarnelli said I was slacking, and boxed my ears. He wasn't very nice to me. Scarry says he ill-treated me. Well, he boxed my ears, but he couldn't keep me awake, and Scarry had a row with him about me. I'd talked to Scarry once or twice before.

SCOTT. Excuse me; would you mind speaking a little more slowly, please? This ought to make a splendid story.

COL. Oh, I'm so glad.

SCOTT. You'd spoken to Mister Scaramouche once or twice before?

COL. And he'd given me some lozenges for my throat. He would not let Quarnelli box my ears, and I got awfully dizzy, and

Scarry said if I was made to go on like that he'd let the audience know about it, and Quarnelli got furious because he knew it would get him the bird.

SCOTT. The bird?

COL. Get him hissed.

SCOTT. Oh, thank you.

COL. It would have, too; Scarry was very popular. Well, Quarnelli spat in Scarry's face, and Scarry knocked him down, and when I woke up I was in bed at Scarry's lodgings.

SCOTT (*startled*). Eh? He'd had you sent there?

COL. He'd brought me there himself. He nursed me for a week. I was feverish, and I must have been a fearful nuisance. Every night when he went to the show I used to cry. The only way I would go to sleep was propped up on his arm. I'm sure he must have got the pins and needles awfully sitting up with me all night long.

SCOTT (*slightly muddled*). Er—you weren't married at this time?

COL. Good gracious, no! I was only a little girl.

SCOTT. You were fifteen or sixteen.

COL. The landlady said I looked more like a half-starved *kid* of seven. I was in love with him, though.

SCOTT (*regretfully*). T't, t't, t't. When were you married, then?

COL. (*laughing*). Poor Scarry didn't know what to do with me when I got better. I wouldn't leave him for a moment.

SCOTT. He wasn't—er—in love with you, then?

COL. Oh yes, I think he was. But he's a man. Men never let out whether they are in love or not. They want to be teased into saying.

SCOTT. Really!

COL. Yes. I bothered him awfully, and at last he persuaded me to go to school for a year or two if he sent me to one.

SCOTT (*very approvingly*). Most proper. So you were sent to a school?

COL. (*nodding*). To a convent—yes. But I hated it, and I ran away.

SCOTT. That was very wrong.

COL. No, it wasn't. It was so silly. But when I got to the place where I thought Scarry was, I found he wasn't there. It was awful!

SCOTT. There are always persons to whom . . .

COL. Yes; I went straight to a music-hall—the stage door, and I met someone I knew, and he told me that Scarry had gone abroad. He didn't know where.

SCOTT. Dear, dear, dear!

COL. (*resignedly*). So I simply had to go back to Quarnelli.

SCOTT. But he had ill-treated you.

COL. I couldn't starve—and I was used to him. I was with him nearly a year more, and then one day I saw Scarry walking down a street with a bag in his hand, and I rushed after him. . . .

Oh, he *had* been worried about me. . . . He was going back to the Continent that very day, and he took me with him—and that's all, too.

SCOTT. Um—yes—yes. And when were you married?

COL. We've been married ever since.

SCOTT. You were married abroad? By registrar, I suppose?

COL. (*agreeably*). I suppose so.

SCOTT. Surely you remember the date? (*COLUMBINE shakes her head.*) But it would be on the certificate. (*With a hopeful horror in his tones*) I suppose you've got one?

COL. I suppose so. Scarry would have it amongst his contracts and things.

SCOTT. Do you mean to say . . . (*Calms himself.*) Didn't you go and sign your name before—anyone—and say: "I take this man to be my wedded husband, and so forth"?

COL. No. They only do that on the stage. Why, what's the matter?

SCOTT (*his disgust gives place to deep compassion as he looks at her cheerful face*). My poor girl, have you been led through your ignorance into a life of sin?

COL. No, I don't think so. I don't quite know what you mean.

SCOTT. Don't know what I mean! You know what sin is.

COL. (*doubtfully*). Wickedness? No, I'm afraid I don't know exactly. Why, what's the matter? You look—shocked.

SCOTT. Shocked? I'm disgusted! You, a bright, good-looking, intelligent young woman tell me you don't know the meaning of sin!

COL. I'm very sorry!

SCOTT. Have you never heard that the wages of sin is death?

COL. Oh yes, I've seen that on the walls in lodgings.

SCOTT. And don't you know what that means?

COL. I never thought it had any meaning. I thought it was just a text.

SCOTT (*prepared for the worst*). I suppose you'll tell me you never heard of hell next?

COL. Oh yes, I've heard of hell.

SCOTT (*greatly relieved*). Well, that's something.

COL. When Tommy was born I was very ill, and a gentleman came and talked to me about hell and frightened me awfully. But Scarry was furious and turned the gentleman out. He thought I was going to die, you see, and he said he wouldn't have me frightened with such ideas at such a time.

SCOTT. Why not? Better late than never.

COL. But it's not true, is it?

SCOTT. Hell? Of course it's true.

COL. A place, all burning flames, where we go to when we die?

SCOTT. Ah, some of us. The wicked who don't repent, and die in their sin.

COL. (*thoughtfully*). Sin? . . . (*Suddenly terrified.*) Oh, you said—do you mean if I were to die now I should die in sin?

SCOTT (*more kindly*). Oh, well, you aren't likely to die just now, are you?

COL. But if I should?

SCOTT. I'm very sorry for you—but—well, you admit that you're not married to that—to Mister Scaramouche. Not properly married to him. You haven't got any certificate, or anything.

COL. (*vaguely*). There's Tommy's birth certificate.

SCOTT. That makes it worse. Poor little chap!

COL. What difference would a certificate make?

SCOTT. The difference between Holy Matrimony and—and the other thing.

COL. Oh, I'm not wicked. I don't feel wicked.

SCOTT (*with deep sympathy*). You wouldn't. It's more your ignorance. We fall by different means. I daresay, on the whole, it's easier by ignorance than by temptation.

COL. Oh, but Scarry wouldn't let me do anything wicked.

SCOTT. My dear girl, don't be silly. Any man would. That's why girls are taught to be so careful—to prevent just what's happened to you. Hasn't he done his best to keep you in ignorance?

COL. No. He wants me to read.

SCOTT. Ah, what sort of books?

COL. He's so good always.

SCOTT. Did he ever speak to you about a future life?

COL. He never let me think about anything so terrible.

SCOTT (*slightly surprised*). Oh, there is a heaven.

COL. Yes, but if there's a hell . . . (*Covers her face with her hands and begins to cry.*) Scarry's always so good, and everything's so comfortable . . .

SCOTT (*rises and comes round above table to her*). The pathway to . . . (*Pauses and looks at her.*) The path of . . . (*Pauses again and comes nearer to her.*) The . . . (*He is touched by her unhappiness.*) Oh, come . . . (*Pats her on the shoulder.*) If it's bad now, think how very bad . . . (*Pats her again.*) I understand how you must feel. It isn't pleasant to think about such things. When my little brother died I was shockingly upset. There, there. You're not bad at heart. It's been your ignorance has put you in the power—of others. Upon my word, I'm glad to be the one to start you seeing how you stand. Get right before it's too late. You're . . .

COL. Please go away.

SCOTT. You'd rather be left alone? (*COLUMBINE nods.*) Just for the present, eh? To look into yourself. Very good. Good-night. (*Comes down to couch and gets hat. Turns at door.*) I'll step in to-morrow and have a few words more with you

about it, if you wish. I do hope you'll sleep well. (*Exits with caution and closes door.*)

(COLUMBINE remains before fire crying softly; she sees that she has got SCOTT'S large handkerchief, which he has given her, and throws it angrily aside. She rises and crosses to window, where she holds back the curtains and looks out. The door opens; she starts and turns, but gives a cry of pleasure as SCARAMOUCHE enters, cheery and cold. He is wearing a muffler around his throat. No collar or tie.)

SCARA. Surprised to see me back so early, eh, my dear?

COL. (*taking his coat into hall.*) Yes. Is anything . . .

SCARA. No, no, no. Shirking. Sheer lazy shirking. I cut all except my own turn just to get back to you.

COL. To me? (*Returns from hall.*)

SCARA. Yes. Aren't you glad to see me? (*Sits in large chair.*)

COL. Of course.

SCARA. Of course. (*Holds out his hands to her. She comes to him.*)
I felt a bit off colour. Hullo! You've been crying.

COL. Y—yes.

SCARA. What is it, dear?

COL. Please—I'm tired.

SCARA. Poor little lady. These babies fag you out.

COL. No. I'm so glad you've come back early, Scarry.

SCARA. So am I.

COL. I—want to talk to you.

SCARA. (*pulling her on to arm of chair where she sits, still holding his hand.*) Talk away.

COL. I want you to tell me about something. Will you, please?

SCARA. If I can. What is it?

COL. I want you to tell me about sin.

SCARA. (*looking at her in surprise.*) Sin?

COL. (*nodding.*) Please, and hell.

(CURTAIN.)

ACT II

SCENE

THE SAME

It is Friday morning, one day having elapsed. The sun shines brightly in at the bay-window. Bedroom doors are shut, the single door is open. By it COLUMBINE is shaking TOMMY into his reefer jacket. SCARAMOUCHE is at bureau reading a copy of the "Argus." He grunts angrily over what he is reading. The sofa has been moved slightly, and is more level with the footlights.

COL. There, Tommy. Now hold May's hand all the way there, and keep very close to Annie at the crossings.

TOMMY. All right. 'Bye, Farver.

SCARA. 'Bye, my son. Take care of the ladies, and always keep on the outside of the pavement.

TOMMY. Of course. I'm a gentleman!

SCARA. True, sir, but don't insist on it. I've heard you say that a dozen times since breakfast. Be off. Good-bye.

(TOMMY goes out at door with COLUMBINE. She is heard calling.)

COL. *(off)*. You'll be very careful of the crossings, won't you, Annie? And the trams. *(Re-enters.)* Oh, those trams! They give me the cold shivers. *(Seeing that SCARAMOUCHE is still busily reading, she stops speaking, and going to table begins to rummage in work-basket that is there.)*

(SCARAMOUCHE grunts indignantly over what he is reading. She looks at him inquiringly. He looks up and catches her eye, then rises and comes to sofa, bringing paper.)

SCARA. Columbine, my dear . . .

COL. Yes?

SCARA. That interviewer—Mister Scott—how much did you tell him the other night?

COL. *(tearful in a moment)*. Oh—he hasn't printed it in his paper, has he?

SCARA. *(surprised)*. Why, what's the matter? Columbine, come here. *(Holds out his hands kindly. She comes to him and sits beside him on sofa.)* You're not looking well, little lady, and I don't

like . . . (*Drops her head as he is looking at her.*) There, there, don't cry. What is there to cry about? I'm not angry with *you* about this nonsense.

COL. Oh, I ought not to have told him.

SCARA. No, no, no. No harm in your telling him. It's his making a story out of it that I resent. Confound the man! Still, it's nothing so very terrible, dear.

COL. (*doubtfully*). Isn't it? What has he printed?

SCARA. Here it is. (*Picks up paper.*) "The popular clown met his charming wife in rather a curious and romantic manner," and then there's the whole story about my punching old Quarnelli's nose, ending up with—"the marriage took place abroad."

COL. Oh! (*She is greatly relieved.*) Is that all? Didn't you want him to know about—you and me?

SCARA. No harm in his knowing, but I (*getting angry*)—I told him to stick to public matters. It's not the thing at all to air one's private affairs like this. It's so—so *theatrical*.

COL. I'm very sorry.

SCARA. No, no, no. It's not your fault at all. I'm sorry I mentioned it. I wouldn't have if I'd known it was going to upset you like this. You're worrying me very much with your pale face, Columbine. Would you see a doctor if I get one to come?

COL. Oh, I'm not ill, am I? Not *very* ill?

SCARA. No, no, no, dear, I hope not.

COL. Not ill enough to die?

SCARA. Good heavens, no, child! Don't talk like that.

COL. It would be awful—wouldn't it?

SCARA. Columbine, my dear, you're not a bit like yourself. (*Takes her hand and pulls her down.*) Die, indeed! Why, a healthy young person like you should no more think of dying than a grasshopper does. What's worrying you, dear? Are these babies an awful lot of trouble?

COL. No. I love looking after babies.

SCARA. There's a dear girl. But there is something wrong. Come, now, what is it? Tell me. I'll try to understand.

COL. No, really, I'm all right.

SCARA. (*firmly, but very kindly*). No, you are not all right, and you must tell me, please. (*Pauses.*) Please.

COL. (*beginning to cry*). Oh, don't . . .

SCARA. Why, Columbine, I thought you always came to me with your troubles. Has anyone been unkind to you? You don't mind Ma's temper, surely?

COL. (*catching at a straw*). She's very bad sometimes.

SCARA. My dear girl!

COL. (*trying to avoid a lie, and trying to avoid the truth, and making a mess of it*). Of course it's *not* Barley, but she—she does get on my nerves sometimes.

SCARA. Nerves? When did you start nerves? There, there,

don't give me a sample now. I'll speak to Ma—but, you know, I don't want to send her away, dear.

COL. Oh no.

SCARA. No. She's old, and she's had a hard life of it. It must be worse to look back on such a life when one is old than to live through it at the time. One sees all one's mistakes afterwards. And poor Ma has made such a lot of mistakes. If I told you you'd be as willing to put up with her tempers as George is.

COL. Tell me.

SCARA. No, no, you wouldn't understand half. But—well—you know the "Prince" she's always talking about?

COL. (*interested*). Oh yes.

SCARA. Well, he was the last of her mistakes. She tried to kill herself.

COL. Ma tried to kill herself!

SCARA. Yes, dear, and people don't do that unless they are more unhappy than you or I can understand.

COL. Please tell me—who was the Prince?

SCARA. Oh, a good-for-nothing young idiot. One of a dozen who used to dangle around after her. She was a very handsome woman then, dear, not a girl . . . eh, about—about forty, and he was fifteen years younger than she was. She really thought a lot of him though, and she left the circus.

COL. With him?

SCARA (*nodding*). And then—in a couple of months—she came back.

COL. (*with conviction*). Oh, he hadn't *married* her!

SCARA (*surprised at her earnestness*). Well no, he hadn't, but . . .

COL. And she tried to kill herself because he hadn't married her!

SCARA. Not . . .

COL. But if he had married her it would have been all right, wouldn't it? She'd never have tried to commit suicide if they'd been properly married . . .

SCARA. Columbine, I never saw you so excited. What's in your mind? Has anyone been saying anything to you about Ma?

COL. No! No, really!

SCARA. I thought perhaps someone had been trying to fill your brain with . . . but you wouldn't understand that if they did. (*Puts his arms round her.*)

COL. I'm very ignorant, aren't I, Scarry? (*Nestles on his shoulder.*)

SCARA. Of some things—yes.

COL. Isn't it very dangerous to be so ignorant?

SCARA. (*stroking her head*). Perhaps it is—dear—perhaps it is.

(*There is a knock at door. GEORGE intrudes his head.*)

GEORGE. May I . . .

SCARA. Come in, George.

(*COLUMBINE crosses to table.*)

GEORGE (*coming into room*). Morning, all. (*Seeing there is something wrong*) Er . . . I beg . . . Did I pop in too suddenly? . . .
OF . . .

SCARA. No, no, no. Come in, George. Glad to see you.

GEORGE. Good egg. All well?

SCARA. Columbine's a bit off colour.

COL. No. No, I'm not. (*Sits above table and takes up needlework.*)

SCARA. (*pleasantly*). Very well, then . . . she's *not*.

GEORGE. Can you pop over to the hall some time during the morning? No hurry. The Band wants to speak to you about to-night.

SCARA. (*taking up "Argus" again*). D'you know what he wants?

GEORGE. Er—yes—I do. He wants to know if you'll allow him to play you into the ring with "Hail, the Conquering Hero Comes."

SCARA. (*sharply*). No, I won't! What nonsense! I'm a clown, not Napoleon or a champion footballer, and I'm not going to be made look ridiculous.

GEORGE. His idea was that—as it's your own night . . .

SCARA. What's that got to do with it? He can stick to his hurry music.

GEORGE. I knew you wouldn't allow it.

SCARA. The Band ought to have known it too. I won't have anything cheap or undignified at any time—least of all on my own night. It lowers the whole tone of the business.

COL. I suppose the Band thought it would be funny.

SCARA. It's not his business to be funny. He's spoiled my turn more than once with his confounded sense of humour. I've given up being humorous myself. The public don't want humour in a clown. They want him to fall over everything he comes across and get up again as if nothing had happened; and they want the Band to play the good old "tiddle iddle um tiddle um tum tum" as loud as he can. That's what the public wants. (*Resumes reading angrily.*)

GEORGE (*sits L. table. Going to COLUMBINE*). Great Man angry!

COL. Yes. Mister Scott put a lot in his paper that Scarry said he ought not to have done. It was my fault, I . . .

SCARA. No, no, no (*looking up from paper*)—it was *not* your fault. I told you to tell him anything he wanted to know. But he should have respected my wishes. I said to him distinctly, "no domestic details."

GEORGE. True. I heard you. (*To COLUMBINE as SCARAMOUCHE resumes reading*) These newspaper men haven't got any conscience, though. Give a man a job on a newspaper and bang goes his conscience.

COL. Don't be silly, George. Mister Scott is a very good man, really.

GEORGE. Is he?

COL. Yes; he belongs to a chapel, and he's most respected in the town. Annie told me that.

SCARA. (*looking up again*). Oh, Columbine's much impressed. (*Laughing*) He brought her a box of chocolates yesterday.

GEORGE. Oho? Then he can't be so bad. Any left? (*Anxiously looks round.*)

COL. (*shaking her head*). Tommy and May finished them all.

GEORGE. Pigs! That's the worst of children. They are so greedy. (*Touching her work*) Faking up the Great Man's props for to-night, eh?

COL. Yes.

GEORGE. Lucky Great Man to have someone to take care of him. What was friend Scott after yesterday? More domestic details?

COL. No. . . . He just came to talk . . . To see me. He only stopped a minute. He—he's been very kind to me. I'm sorry about . . .

SCARA. (*jumping up furiously*). Confound it all! This is the limit. Listen! (*Reads*) . . . um . . . um—"with one of his expansive smiles!" Expansive smiles, indeed! "he bade us a cordial good-bye before sitting down to a *recherché* little tea at which—a boiled haddock—butter'd toast—and an *enticing apple-pie* eked out the usual slender resources of the afternoon meal!" Details of what I have to eat! Confound it all, I might be a Shakespearean actor!

(COLUMBINE, *who has listened apprehensively, now evinces great relief. She suddenly puts down work and goes quickly into bedroom.*)

GEORGE (*watches COLUMBINE off*). I say . . . is that little lady ill?

SCARA. (*still fuming over paper*). Eh? No. I hope not . . . at least, she says she isn't. I confess I am a bit worried about her. Are they waiting for me at the hall?

GEORGE. No, no, any time will do.

SCARA. (*crossing and putting paper on fire*). That's one destroyed, anyhow. (*Pauses doubtfully.*) Do you think she looks ill?

GEORGE. Well—yes, I do.

SCARA. (*standing with his back to fire*). I don't understand her. She seems more worried than ill.

GEORGE. Worried? Yes, she does.

SCARA. What on earth is she worrying about?

GEORGE. Won't she say?

SCARA. She says Ma's temper.

GEORGE. The old lady's temper?

SCARA. Oh, it isn't that. That's an excuse. That's the devil of it; she won't tell me—she makes excuses.

GEORGE. I should have thought she'd have told you.

SCARA. Yes. But she sometimes has an idea that she mustn't bother me. I'll speak to Barley, though. It won't hurt the old lady to be pulled up a bit. (*Pauses.*) Um . . . I wonder . . .

GEORGE. What?

SCARA. I wonder if it would be better for her if she had someone to talk to in the evenings. Ma goes to bed very early, you know. Perhaps spending evening after evening alone—with no one to talk to—and she doesn't read, you know . . . Perhaps it might tend to make her—er—introspective.

GEORGE (*with conviction*). I don't think so.

SCARA. No? Well, neither do I. But I'm not sure.

GEORGE. She told me only the other day that she didn't mind being left alone. I was saying that if I spent an evening with nothing to do, nothing to read, and nobody to talk to it'd give me the blue pip. She seemed tickled to death by the idea. She said then that she never minded being left alone.

SCARA. No, I never thought she did. She's a simple little soul. Young people do worry over unpleasant ideas, though.

GEORGE. That's so. But where's she to get them to worry over? She's never been to a boarding-school, or mixed much with girls of her own age.

SCARA. (*laughing at GEORGE'S cynicism*). George! (*Produces cigar-case and offers GEORGE one, which is accepted.*) Ah, well—perhaps she's only a bit run down.

(*Enter MRS. LA B. She wears a bonnet and cape, and is very much out of breath and temper.*)

Hullo, Ma. (*Crosses to door for coat.*)

MRS. LA B. (*goes to sofa and sits*). Oh, these stairs . . . what do they want to build stairs for, I should like to know?

SCARA. Here's your friend George.

MRS. LA B. (*ungraciously*). So I see. He's too late for breakfast.

SCARA. (*coming back into room with coat and muffler.*) Cold out, George?

GEORGE (*rises*). Eh? Yes, rather.

SCARA. Cold enough for an overcoat?

GEORGE. Well, I didn't put mine on.

MRS. LA B. You haven't got one.

(*SCARAMOUCHE puts coat down.*)

SCARA. (*looking out of window*). It looks gloriously bright out. What do you say to a sharp walk, George, after I've had a word with the Band?

GEORGE. Good egg.

SCARA. (*looking at watch*). A sharp half-hour's walk, and then you come back here to dinner with us, eh?

GEORGE (*looking doubtfully at MRS. LA B.*). I should like to very much . . .

MRS. LA B. (*dryly*). I'm sure you would. You haven't ordered dinner at your own rooms by any chance, have you?

GEORGE. . . . Er . . . It can be . . . I needn't be in for it. . . .

SCARA. That's settled then. I'll talk to the Band for five minutes. Meet me outside the hall in ten.

GEORGE. Good egg.

MRS. LA B. Will ten minutes be enough for Mr. Salamandro to get back to his digs and cancel the dinner he has ordered there?

SCARA. Oh, that reminds me, Ma. (*Comes down R. of sofa*). I want to speak to you. I don't think you quite realise it, but your temper is getting, if anything, worse every day.

MRS. LA B. Oh, indeed! If you don't like me, turn me out! I'm not the one to stay with people who want to get rid of me.

SCARA. I don't want to get rid of you. I only want to say that you will make things more comfortable for us all, and especially for Columbine . . .

MRS. LA B. Columbine? What's Columbine got to do with—that Cormorant—staying to dinner?

SCARA. I am not discussing George staying to dinner. Neither George nor I object to your temper in the least.

MRS. LA B. Oh, indeed!

SCARA. Columbine *does*. She told me this morning that you made her very miserable.

MRS. LA B. That I did? Why, I've never been nasty to the child in my life.

SCARA. No, I don't believe you have been. But be a bit better tempered generally, will you?

(MRS. LA B. *unfortunately catches GEORGE'S eye fixed uncomfortably upon her.*)

MRS. LA B. No, I won't! If you want to get rid of me, turn me out. There's always workhouses and morgues for those that nobody wants.

SCARA. (*shrugging his shoulders as he goes to door and opens it*). In ten minutes, George!

GEORGE. Ay, ay!

(SCARAMOUCHE *goes out, leaving GEORGE standing on hearthrug trying vainly to avoid looking at MRS. LA B., who is still sitting on sofa.*)

MRS. LA B. I suppose you think yourself clever, standing there and grinning while I'm being spoken to like that.

GEORGE. I'm very sorry . . .

MRS. LA B. No, you're not. You're glad to see me humbled in the dust.

GEORGE. Upon my honour . . .

MRS. LA B. I don't blame you. I should be delighted to see you so.

GEORGE. But . . . really . . .

MRS. LA B. (*getting sorry for herself*). If my temper's so bad why do they deliberately put me out by inviting you to meals? They know perfectly well I can't bear to see you eat.

GEORGE. I'm awfully sorry if I'm the cause.

MRS. LA B. Oh, you're not the cause. Don't flatter yourself. It's my own beastly nature. I shouldn't have got so bad, though, if everything hadn't been done to annoy me.

GEORGE. I . . .

MRS. LA B. (*almost tearful*). My temper's ruined now; I'll never get on with the other inmates in the workhouse. It'll have to be the morgue. But it's not me that . . . Damn it, I haven't got a handkerchief.

(*GEORGE steps forward and gives her his handkerchief which is at her feet. He gives it to her nervously and sits L. of table after looking at his watch.*)

MRS. LA B. It isn't me that's upset Columbine, though.

GEORGE. No, no, no—of course not.

MRS. LA B. No, it's that man Scott.

GEORGE. Scott? How?

MRS. LA B. How do you think? He's a good-looking, well-set-up young fellow; and he's a sight nearer her own age.

GEORGE. I'm afraid I don't understand how that . . .

MRS. LA B. (*angrily*). Then you're a bigger fool . . . (*modifying the remark*) Then you're a fool. He's got a moustache, too.

GEORGE. Why should that upset Columbine?

MRS. LA B. Oh, you . . . When a girl looks out for a man and tries to get a chance to speak to him alone—and goes pale when he looks at her—what does it mean?

GEORGE. Mean? Why—er—but Columbine doesn't do that?

MRS. LA B. Yes, she does.

GEORGE (*incredulously*). Looks out for Scott?

MRS. LA B. Yes, I've watched her. He called yesterday, and that child jumped when he was mentioned. She was longing to be left alone with him. I saw that, and stuck in the room. He just sat and gazed at her like a dying donkey.

GEORGE. Oh, quite possibly he's a bit attracted by her—though I'm told he's engaged to some girl here in the town.

MRS. LA B. What's that got to do with it?

GEORGE. Nothing, I admit. Oh yes, quite possibly he's struck with her.

MRS. LA B. And she with him.

GEORGE. Oh no, I don't think that. I can't. She's so happy with the Great Man. I don't believe she could be happier.

MRS. LA B. Very likely she couldn't. That's nothing to do with it.

When a woman is absolutely happy with one man she generally begins to look about for another to make her miserable.

GEORGE. Oh, I don't think that.

MRS. LA B. Don't you? I suppose I understand my own sex.

GEORGE. Yes, yes, I daresay.

MRS. LA B. (*piling up her proofs*). That poor child told *him* . . . (*pointing after SCARAMOUCHE*) that it was my temper made her look so miserable. You'll admit she looks miserable?

GEORGE. Oh yes, I noticed it myself.

MRS. LA B. Do you think I'm the cause? Do you think after putting up with me for five years she's going to be made pale and weepish by my beastliness now—all in a couple of days?

GEORGE. Oh no.

MRS. LA B. Oh no!

GEORGE. Still, there might be some other cause beside being—er—
attracted by that man.

MRS. LA B. (*scornfully*). What other? Eh? What other?

GEORGE. Well—I can't say offhand.

MRS. LA B. No, you can't! There's no other cause possible. Nothing ever makes a woman really happy or really miserable except some blackguard of a man.

GEORGE. Er—er—if you are right surely the Great Man can look after her.

MRS. LA B. (*with increased scorn*). Surely he can't. He's made a mess of it already trying to be kind and considerate to her and she's had to tell him lies or feel like an ungrateful wretch. It's his own fault. You can't tell a man unpleasant truths when he behaves like an angel. He should have lost his temper and boxed her ears for sniv'ling. Then she'd have lost her temper and told him she cared for someone else. Then he'd have got furiously jealous and kept her locked up for a fortnight, and by that time she'd have got over it. A man can always get a woman back if he's unreasonable enough and doesn't try to understand her.

GEORGE. You're very bitter.

MRS. LA B. I am . . . about men.

(COLUMBINE *returns quietly*.)

There isn't a man to be trusted . . .

GEORGE (*seeing COLUMBINE and trying to stop MRS. LA B.*). Oh, quite so. Yes, yes. Oh yes.

MRS. LA B. (*angrily*). Don't interrupt me with your "Yes, yes, yes!" Just because you're a man yourself . . . (*Sees COLUMBINE and stops abruptly*). Oh!

GEORGE (*looking at watch again*). Well, I must be going. Oh! (*Whispers to COLUMBINE*) I'm coming back—to dinner—

Great Man's invitation. (*Puts his finger on lips and indicates MRS. LA B. with much caution before going softly out.*)

(*MRS. LA B. has been struggling with her bonnet; she has it off now and in her hand.*)

COL. Shall I take your bonnet, Barley?

MRS. LA B. (*snappishly*). It's all right . . . (*checks herself*) Thank you, my dear. (*Rises, puts bonnet on sideboard, looks at COLUMBINE and says again with increased politeness*) Thank you.

(*MRS. LA B. crosses back to sofa.*)

COL. Baby's asleep again. She does sleep a lot. (*Settles down to her sewing.*)

MRS. LA B. Good thing for her. (*Sits on sofa.*) Columbine?

COL. Yes?

MRS. LA B. Does my—beastly temper really upset you so much?

COL. Oh, has Scarry . . . ?

MRS. LA B. (*grimly*). Yes. He's spoken to me about it. Satisfied?

COL. Oh no. I'm very sorry. I didn't mean him to speak to you about it. I only said it because—because I . . .

MRS. LA B. Because you wanted to say something beside the truth, eh?

COL. Oh!

MRS. LA B. Oh yes.

COL. Oh, but you really have been a little awful once or twice, Barley.

MRS. LA B. (*still grimly*). Well—I'll try not to be so "awful" any more. Does that please you?

COL (*getting up and coming to MRS. LA B.*). No, I'm horrid. Please go on just as you've always done. It's not you a bit. It's—something else.

MRS. LA B. Yes, I know.

COL. You know?

MRS. LA B. And you couldn't tell the Great Man because he was so kind.

COL. Oh! You really *do* know?

MRS. LA B. Of course I do.

COL. I'm so miserable. (*Sits beside MA.*)

MRS. LA B. Yes, and you're likely to be if you go on as you're going now.

COL. Oh, don't! Tell me what to do.

MRS. LA B. I'm not going to tell you. If you're sensible you'll see for yourself what to do.

COL. What?

MRS. LA B. Give him up, of course.

COL. Give him up! Barley, I can't!

MRS. LA B. Yes, you can. You'll get over it.

COL. It can't be so bad. I feel every time I look at him that he simply *couldn't do anything wrong*.

MRS. LA B. My dear, if you feel that way about a man, you can depend upon it he's a bad lot. Think for yourself.

COL. I've thought 'til I'm tired. Surely if I . . . follow my heart . . .

MRS. LA B. Don't do it! I used to say that. Look at me now.

COL. You followed your heart?

MRS. LA B. A dozen times at least.

COL. Barley!

MRS. LA B. Oh, I know. You think you'd only do it this once. But it's a habit that grows on one. Look at me. *You don't want to know what Hell is like.*

COL. (*jumping up in awful fear*). No, no, I don't . . . Oh!

MRS. LA B. (*surprised*). Child, you are in a state. What is it?

COL. I—I—please . . . Oh, how awful everything is! (*Head on BARLEY'S shoulder.*)

MRS. LA B. (*almost tenderly*). Deary! (*Rises.*) Deary, you're quite hysterical. What have I said?

(*A knock. Enter BOB.*)

BOB. Please, 'm, Mister Scott's here again.

MRS. LA B. He—tell him Miss Columbine's too ill to see anyone.

BOB (*coming down sympathetically*). Aren't you well, 'm?

MRS. LA B. (*angrily*). Don't I tell you . . .

COL. No—I've only got a headache. Please ask Mister Scott to come in.

BOB. You'll find him rather trying company, 'm, if you are ill.

COL. No—no, I'm not.

(*Exit Bob.*)

MRS. LA B. H'm. Well, *I can't stop you.* (*Goes towards fire.*)

COL. Please, Barley, I want to talk to Mister Scott.

MRS. LA B. After what I've said?

COL. Partly because of it. He—he's very kind.

MRS. LA B. (*going to door*). Yes, they *all* are.

(*SCOTT knocks and enters. MRS. LA B. gives him a prolonged glare as she passes out. He watches her uncomfortably, holds the door open for her and shuts it. He then comes down to COLUMBINE.*)

SCOTT (*shaking hands*). How do you do—quite well? Ah, you're looking pale!

COL. Yes, I've got a headache.

SCOTT. You have been looking into yourself, and you are not pleased with what you have seen there, I'm so thankful. (*Facing COLUMBINE, he sits on sofa and looks at her with obvious kindness.*) How are the children?

COL. They're quite well. (*Sits chair L. of table.*)

SCOTT. Poor little mites! (*Pauses and studies her.*) I am so glad to see that my words have had a good effect on you. Perhaps you read the little book I brought?

COL. (*rummaging in work-basket and producing a paper-covered tract*). I've tried to. But I can't read very well, you know. I found out how to spell—hell—though, and then I went through the book, and every time I came to the word I shivered. I didn't believe you the other night, you know.

SCOTT. No? But you do now.

COL. I can't help it. I don't want to.

SCOTT. Nobody ever *wants* to believe the truth.

COL. Why not?

SCOTT. Why not! Why, because the truth is a very unpleasant thing. It's only another proof of the truth of what I said that it upsets you. But, you see, you had to believe it in time.

COL. (*nods*). Everything everyone's said since seems to prove it.

SCOTT (*with joy*). Ah, your conscience is awake, and you listen for evidence now instead of trusting blindly to your own feelings! Once let your conscience be aroused—no matter how long it has slept—and there is no quieting it.

COL. But they never used to talk about such things.

SCOTT. Oh yes, they did, but you didn't heed them. Conscience is like a sunbeam that shows up all the dust and cobwebs in a house. They were there before, but until the sunbeam came—ah—no one noticed them!

COL. Where's the use of a conscience if it only makes me unhappy?

SCOTT. Ah, you admit you are unhappy?

COL. Yes.

SCOTT. Then *there's* the use!

COL. Really!

SCOTT. Yes. Don't you want to be happy and at rest again?

COL. Oh yes!

SCOTT. There! Your conscience prompts you to turn aside from your present life and leave—all this (*indicates ceiling*) behind you.

COL. You mean leave Scarry!

SCOTT. Doesn't your conscience prompt you to do that?

COL. Oh no. I'd never be happy without Scarry.

SCOTT. Not *so* happy, perhaps, but your conscience would be at rest. You'll never be happy *with* him now.

COL. (*thoughtfully*). Barley has been telling me the same thing.

SCOTT. The—er old lady?

COL. Yes. Oh—but I can't leave Scarry! It would be awful. And May and Tommy?

SCOTT. Leave all your sins behind you.

COL. But it would be cruel to leave them.

SCOTT. They are the children of your sin, and they must bear their share of the punishment of it.

COL. (*resentfully*). What do you mean? It's not their fault.

SCOTT. No—it isn't. But, if it comes to that, it's not *your* fault. I don't look upon you as wilfully sinful. But fault is not what counts. It's what one does.

COL. But they haven't done anything.

SCOTT (*finally*). They were born under sinful circumstances.

COL. Oh, how awful the world is. I wonder anyone bothers to live.

SCOTT. Now, you're talking wickedly and foolishly. We live because it is our duty, and it is wrong to die if one can help it.

COL. (*with rising anger*). Oh!

SCOTT. Please don't look upon me as an enemy because I tell you all this. I'm your friend—the only true friend you have ever had, my poor girl. I understand just how you have been placed. Lots of girls would have done the same if they hadn't known any better. It's that man Sca—

COL. No, Scarry is not to blame. I don't understand—but I know he's not to blame. I think it's the awful ideas themselves that are.

SCOTT. Well, well—perhaps you are right. I'm broad-minded enough to see that—with a pretty girl like you—things were bound to happen as they did. Especially with a man always travelling about as *he* is. People as ignorant as you were before I opened your eyes are a temptation of the Devil. Surely—if you want him to be happy there's another reason to leave him.

COL. Do you mean to say I've made *him* wicked?

SCOTT. Well, you gave him the chance . . .

COL. And the children?

SCOTT. Well, there you *are* responsible . . .

COL. (*blazing out*). I don't believe you. Things couldn't be so awful. I know I've been ignorant, but I'm not wicked. I'm not! You've told me lies to make me miserable. Scarry wouldn't do anything . . .

SCOTT. Oh, my dear girl . . .

COL. You're a liar! (*Stops suddenly.*)

(*There is a pause.*)

SCOTT (*rising meekly*). I'm not offended. I'm sorry to see that . . .

COL. (*still furiously angry*). Go away!

SCOTT (*repeats calmly*). I am sorry to see that your fascination for that man . . .

COL. (*breaking down and burying her face in her arms*). Oh, please go away!

SCOTT (*regaining courage*). No, I will not go away! Not till I have told you what you are doing. I would be failing in my duty if I did not warn you of where you are drifting to. You don't know. You harden your heart, and close your

eyes to the *truth*! And you think that you will go on as you have been going on for the rest of your shameful life. But you won't!! No! You don't think you'll hold that man's affections for ever, do you? Because you won't. He'll tire of you as men always tire of women they aren't properly married to. His conscience will prick him, and he'll blame you, and rightly, for your share in his sin. And your children! They'll be no happiness to you when they come to know what a curse you've been to them. For that's what you will be—a curse! Because you wouldn't listen to my words. (*Takes hat and goes out in righteous indignation.*)

(COLUMBINE starts up after a moment, saying, "I shan't—it's not true!" but she subsides again weakly. Time enough passes for SCOTT to have got clear of the house, then she lifts her head again and listens.)

(ANNIE's voice is heard—far off but coming quickly nearer. It is joined by a murmur of other voices as she reaches the stairs. She is evidently beside herself with horror and is saying, "Oh, ma'am—oh, ma'am," over and over again.)

(COLUMBINE gets to her feet just as ANNIE bursts into the room, tear-stained and out of breath with running and sobbing.)

ANNIE. Oh, ma'am, they're killed—they're killed—oh, dear! . . .

COL. (*terrified by the girl's manner*). Tommy and May?

ANNIE. Yes'm. At least—no, not May . . .

COL. But Tommy! Tommy? Killed?

(SCARAMOUCHE comes in quickly and puts ANNIE aside.)

SCARA. What are you talking about, Anne? You're frightening her to death! (*Takes COLUMBINE in his arms and makes her sit down again.*) There, there—it's nothing serious, dear.

COL. But Tommy . . .?

SCARA. Scarcely hurt. He's been knocked down by a bike . . .

COL. Oh, he's dead.

SCARA. No, he's not—he's howling like a good fellow.

(COLUMBINE gives a hysterical laugh.)

Gently, gently. (*To ANNIE*) Clear out.

(ANNIE goes off weeping.)

COL. But he's hurt.

SCARA. He's got a fine lump on his head. There, there—he's had a dozen worse in his little life. There, there—of course you're upset . . .

COL. You're trying to break it to me . . .

SCARA. No, I'm not. You'll be able to see for yourself in a minute. George is bringing the little fellow along. I rushed ahead in case . . .

(Voices outside.)

There they are now. *(Goes up to door and opens it.)* Take him straight into the bedroom.

(Goes off, leaving COLUMBINE alone for a moment. She sits looking straight ahead of her. He returns through folding doors from bedroom where all the others can be seen sympathising with the unseen TOMMY.)

SCARA. Come and look at him for yourself. He's asking for you . . .

(Returns into bedroom, leaving doors almost closed. COLUMBINE rises unsteadily.)

COL. No—I won't go near him! I won't go near him! It's me, me, me! *(Faints.)*

(CURTAIN.)

ACT III

SCENE

THE SAME

Early evening of the same day. The lamp is burning on table. SCARAMOUCHE is discovered in shirt sleeves making toast before the fire. There is a knock and GEORGE enters very softly. SCARAMOUCHE nods to him warmly and goes on with the toast.

GEORGE. Toast again ?

SCARA. Yes, the young gentleman thought he could manage another slice. I'm to butter it *quite* hot ; remind me, will you ?

GEORGE (*perfectly seriously*). I'll try to. I just peeped in on my way to the show. Is *she* any better ?

SCARA. Goodness knows. She's still locked in Ma's room.

GEORGE. Hasn't she had any tea ?

SCARA. No.

GEORGE. Good gracious ! Then she's had nothing since breakfast. SCARA. Ma's taken her some food, but she won't touch it. She lets Ma in, but she won't let me come near her. (*Stands back from fire, holding toast dejectedly in front of him.*)

GEORGE. You're to butter that hot.

SCARA. (*hastening to obey*). By Jove ! yes ! Thank you, George.

GEORGE. Tommy still doing well ?

SCARA. Famously. Eaten six hearty meals since dinner.

GEORGE (*with a slight laugh*). Good egg.

SCARA. It's queer ; he doesn't seem to notice that she hasn't been near him.

GEORGE. She hasn't yet ?

SCARA. I told you.

GEORGE. Yes, yes.

(MRS. LA BOLARO *enters*. *They both look to her for information.*)

MRS. LA B. It's no good. She won't touch a thing. I can't get her to. Oh ! (*Sits wearily, but with a touch of temper, in chair L. of table.*)

SCARA. Don't take the hard chair, Ma.

MRS. LA B. I'm set now. Oh ! I suppose you won't say this is my temper.

SCARA. I wish I knew what it was. What's she doing?

MRS. LA B. She's been writing all the afternoon—or trying to. Her hands are covered with ink.

SCARA. Poor little lady. I'd give a good deal to . . . (*Shrugs his shoulders hopelessly and goes into bedroom carrying the toast.*)

GEORGE (*after a pause*). So would I.

MRS. LA B. What?

GEORGE. I was saying I'd give a good deal to know what's bothering her.

MRS. LA B. Would you? Ugh! What's it got to do with you?

GEORGE. Well, I'm fond of her in a way.

MRS. LA B. In a way, yes! The kind of way that makes you curious about everything she does. That's a man's way.

GEORGE. Er—don't you want to know what's troubling her?

MRS. LA B. I do know!

(SCARAMOUCHE *returns from the bedroom.*)

SCARA. The young gentleman fancies that a dose of ginger beer would do him good. I don't think he ought to have it, though, do you?

MRS. LA B. No!

SCARA. No. Of course not. I—I wish Columbine would come and tell him, then. I hate refusing him anything while he's got that bandage on his head.

MRS. LA B. Huh! Suppose you were landed with all three of them on your hands for good. I should like to see what you'd do then.

SCARA. (*very sharply*). Don't talk nonsense.

MRS. LA B. You haven't the strength of mind to refuse them anything.

SCARA. (*with great determination*). I'll go and tell him I think he's had enough.

(*Goes back into bedroom.*)

GEORGE (*after watching him off*). Did you say you thought you knew?

MRS. LA B. I did.

GEORGE. But—I don't want to know—but can't you do anything?

MRS. LA B. It's all done. She saw that man Scott again this morning.

GEORGE (*disappointed to find that she is still on the Scott tack.*) Oh! Scott.

MRS. LA B. Yes, and she's been locked up in my room ever since, crying her eyes out.

GEORGE (*impatiently*). I know. But *why*?

MRS. LA B. Well, I suppose she did what was right and said good-bye to him. It was bound to upset her. She—don't shake your head at me.

GEORGE. I can't believe you're right.

MRS. LA B. Don't, then! But she'll be better when she gets out of this town, you'll see.

(SCARAMOUCHE *re-enters very shamefacedly, goes to sideboard, and takes therefrom a bottle of ginger beer, with which he returns to bedroom.* MRS. LA B. *watches him scornfully, GEORGE sympathetically.*)

GEORGE. He's very upset. If you're so certain, don't you think you might drop him a hint that things will be better in a few days?

MRS. LA B. Idiot! How on earth can I tell him that much without telling him a lot more. Columbine'll tell him herself in time.

GEORGE. Yes—if it's true.

MRS. LA B. (*mocking him angrily*). "If it's true!" Why, what do you think she's getting herself all inky for now?

GEORGE (*with interest*). I've no idea.

MRS. LA B. No, of course you haven't. Trying to write to the Great Man, confessing—because she's not got the courage to tell him to his face. Girls are fools.

(GEORGE *abstractedly turns over the things in COLUMBINE'S work-basket, which has been moved to sofa.*)

So are men. Look at the Great Man with Tommy.

GEORGE (*bringing the tract to light*). Good Lord!

MRS. LA B. (*craning round*). What's the matter?

GEORGE (*keeping his back to her and glancing through tract*). Oh, nothing.

MRS. LA B. You make fuss enough . . .

GEORGE. No, no. What were you saying about Tommy?

(SCARAMOUCHE *returns, MRS. LA B. addressing her remarks to him.*)

MRS. LA B. I was saying he was spoilt. That's what I was saying. Spoilt! What does he demand now?

SCARA. He was asking if you would go and sit with him while I have my tea.

MRS. LA B. Me! (*Rises and hurries into bedroom.*) Bless 'is little 'eart!

SCARA. (*ringing bell, and then putting coat on*). I hardly know whether I'm on my head or my heels. Phew! (*Sits in large chair by fire, and lights pipe.*) Don't know when there's been such an upset in our little family.

(*Enter BOB.*)

BOB. You'll have your tea now, sir?

SCARA. Please. Have some with me, George ?

(BOB *pauses politely for GEORGE'S reply.*)

GEORGE. No, thanks.

(*Exit BOB.*)

I had some earlier, with Maysie and Ma, before the little one was put to bed.

SCARA. Oho ! On Ma's invitation ?

GEORGE. Well—Bob had laid a place for me, and Ma said she'd rather have me eating than looking on ; she was more used to my eating.

SCARA. (*laughing*). Ma's behaved very decently. She looked after May without a murmur. And, thank goodness, she took baby in to Columbine ! I don't know what I should have done.

(BOB *returns with tray and tea for two. Not the tea of Act I. Some sandwiches and a pair of radishes, besides tea, milk, and sugar.*)

(*Rises and goes to double doors.*) Well, I think I'll have a wash. (*Hesitates.*) No, I'll wash in Tommy's own room. (*Goes to other door.*) Hope I don't wake Maysie. (*Returns to bedroom door, but hesitates again.*) But if Tommy sees me washing he'll want *his* hands washed. I never saw him so aggressively cleanly. (*Goes out at single door.*)

BOB. Shall I pour out tea for Mister Scaramouche, sir ?

GEORGE (*who has taken tract from his pocket and is now skimming through it.*) Eh ? Yes. He'll be back in a moment. (*Takes another look at the tract.*) Er—Bob !

BOB (*pouring out two cups of tea*). Yessir ?

GEORGE. What sort of a gentleman is this Mister Scott ?

BOB. Mister Scott, sir ? Well, what sort of a gentleman would you think, sir ?

GEORGE. I don't know anything about him. How does he strike you ?

BOB. Oh, *I* don't like him, sir. But then, he's a chapel-goer and I'm a free-thinker. We haven't got nothing in common.

GEORGE. No. Er—is this (*shows tract*) anything in his line ?

BOB (*taking tract*). Just about, sir. There's one down in the bar now as he gave to Annie. It's called "Eternity : What does it mean to you ?" Has he been trying to convert you, sir ?

GEORGE. Er—no—no.

BOB (*genially*). Good job for him ! He'd have his hands full, wouldn't he, sir ? (*going out.*)

(SCARAMOUCHE *returns, and BOB, after encouraging the sandwiches to look appetising, exits.*)

SCARA. I tried her door again. She wouldn't answer me. What in heaven or earth is the matter with her?

GEORGE. Is she uncomfortable in her mind?

SCARA. (*irritably*). You yourself said you were convinced she was not. Didn't you tell me a whole rigmarole? . . .

GEORGE. Yes, yes.

SCARA. (*sitting at table and grumbling*). Well, then—hullo! Bob's brought up two teas. One's for you, George.

GEORGE. I—er—said . . .

SCARA. Yes, but here it is, poured out and all—you can't hurt Bob's feelings. (*Hands GEORGE cup and a sandwich.*)

GEORGE. I really do feel . . .

SCARA. Tut, tut, tut! I'm uncommonly glad of your company. I certainly don't want to be left alone to think. How goes the time? (*Looks at watch.*) We shall have to be starting in a moment.

GEORGE (*producing the tract*). Did you ever see that before?

SCARA. (*without interest*). No, not that I know of.

GEORGE. I found it in Columbine's work-basket.

SCARA. Oh?

GEORGE. Have you any idea where she got it?

SCARA. Probably picked it up in some rooms.

GEORGE. Don't you think that—this sort of reading might not have the best possible effect upon a simple young lady like Columbine?

SCARA. If she read it. She can hardly read, though, remember.

GEORGE. No—I'd forgotten that. (*Pauses nonplussed.*)

(MRS. LA B. returns from bedroom and rings bell with great decision. SCARAMOUCHE looks at her inquiringly.)

MRS. LA B. You're a nice one to have charge of an invalid, I don't think!

SCARA. Why, what have I done?

MRS. LA B. Giving him ginger beer and toast and oranges and all such rubbish. What he wants is a glass of milk. He says so himself. A nice—healthy—glass of milk.

(*Enter BOB.*)

BOB (*to SCARAMOUCHE*). You rang, sir?

MRS. LA B. I did. (*Goes to sideboard.*) Will you please bring me up a glass of milk for Master Tommy?

BOB. Cold milk, 'm. Yes'm. (*Starts to go.*)

MRS. LA B. (*stopping him*). And if you have a few gingerbread nuts in the house . . .

BOB. Yes'm.

MRS. LA B. Bring them up, too. He rather fancies a few gingerbread nuts.

(BOB goes out. MRS. LA B. returns to bedroom indignantly deaf to a chuckle from the two men.)

SCARA. Ma's coming out strong. I wish she wouldn't look so infernally knowing about Columbine, though.

(There is a timid tap at the door.)

Come in.

(ANNIE enters right down C., L. of SCARRY.)

ANNIE *(very nervously)*. Oh, please, sir . . .

SCARA. Well?

ANNIE. Please, sir, it's—that is—am I to—if Miss Columbine should ask me to deliver a letter for her—please, sir . . .

SCARA. Yes?

ANNIE. What am I to do, sir?

SCARA. Why, deliver it, of course.

ANNIE. Whoever it may be to?

SCARA. Certainly.

ANNIE. I thought you might like . . .

SCARA. You know perfectly well that Miss Columbine's orders are to be obeyed without consulting me.

ANNIE. Yes, sir, but seeing the state of mind she's in . . .

SCARA. Seeing that you nearly frightened her out of her wits, yes?

ANNIE. Oh, sir! *(Melts into tears.)*

SCARA. *(irritably, pushes chair back)*. Oh, for goodness' sake, don't you begin. *(Goes to fire.)* I—I'm sorry. I'm a little short-tempered to-day. Of course you couldn't have done anything else but lose your head. There, there. Take these things away. *(Retreats into bedroom and closes door.)*

(ANNIE mops her eyes and begins to collect tea-things on to tray.)

GEORGE *(suddenly)*. Annie!

ANNIE. Yes, sir?

GEORGE. Why did you ask Mister Scaramouche that about a letter?

ANNIE. I—sir—I didn't know what to do.

GEORGE. She's given you one to deliver.

ANNIE. She told me not to mention it to anyone, sir.

GEORGE. Quite right then, don't. *(Rises.)* Deliver it by hand, eh?

ANNIE. Yes, sir.

GEORGE. Yes, yes.

(Watches ANNIE thoughtfully until she goes out, much dis-comfited by his steady gaze. He then goes up and knocks at double doors, looking at his watch.)

I say, unless you want to be away for your own benefit, you'd better come along.

SCARA. *(off)*. He's eating! He's eating! I don't think he'll do so badly now. *(Appears in doorway.)* Come in and say good-night to him. I'll get my coat.

(GEORGE goes into bedroom. SCARAMOUCHE crosses and takes his hat and coat from chair by window, where they have

been lying since Act II. His back is to the door, but he turns on hearing it open as COLUMBINE comes quietly in. She starts on seeing SCARAMOUCHE.)

COLUMBINE. I thought you'd gone.

SCARA. Columbine! Weren't you coming out till I had?

COL. Oh, please don't be nasty to me.

SCARA. My dear, I don't think you've been over-nice to me. *(Holds out his hands to her.)* Come here.

COL. *(drawing back)*. I . . .

SCARA. *(astonished and very hurt)*. Columbine!

COL. *(inaudibly)*. I'm very bad for you.

SCARA. *(trying to catch her words)*. What?

(COLUMBINE shakes her head.)

I didn't hear what you said, dear.

COL. *(still inaudibly)*. It—it's not your fault.

SCARA. I don't understand you. *(Moves round above L. of sofa, leaving coat and hat on it.)* Come and sit down and try to tell me.

COL. No. I mustn't.

SCARA. Mustn't talk to me? Why not?

COL. I—I—I'm a curse to you.

SCARA. Oh, my dear!

COL. Yes, I am.

SCARA. *(trying to speak jestingly)*. And what have you done that has transformed you into a curse?

COL. I—I haven't done anything. It's just happened to me through my ignorance.

SCARA. *(very much impressed and surprised and puzzled by her words and manner)*. God bless my soul, Columbine, I believe you're wandering! *(Goes to her.)* No, no, don't draw away from me. *(Takes her chair L. of table and makes her sit down. He sits against table holding her hands and watching her closely.)* Now, tell me why you think you're a curse to me?

COL. I can't.

SCARA. You know, Columbine, I don't like superstitious nonsense.

COL. It's true.

SCARA. Don't be silly! What have you done that you develop into a sort of Jonah?

COL. *(dogmatically)*. It's not what we do.

SCARA. Now, Columbine, listen to me. You're run down, I can see that; but you'll never pull round if you give way to these unhealthy ideas. Pull yourself together. *(She turns away her head.)* Won't anything cheer you up? Columbine . . .

COL. *(without looking up)*. Yes.

SCARA. What do you say—when these towns are done—to giving up touring and settling down in a nice little house near

London, with a big garden for the babies to play in, and where you could grow flowers and . . .

COL. (*breaking down again*). Don't! You're so kind to me, and it's no good. I should be a curse always.

SCARA. (*with a touch of annoyance*). My dear Columbine . . .

(*GEORGE comes out of bedroom.*)

GEORGE. Coming along? (*Sees COLUMBINE.*) Hullo! (*Looks inquiringly at SCARAMOUCHE.*)

SCARA. Result of my attempts at consolation. Come along, George. Good-night, my dear.

COL. (*listlessly, without looking up*). Good-night.

(*The door shuts behind them. She starts up with a sudden exclamation and stands thinking for a moment. Then she goes to the door, opens it, and calls very tenderly, "Good-bye, dear." She listens for an answer, but there is none. She goes out on to landing and calls again, more loudly, more hopelessly, "Scarry, good-bye," but SCARAMOUCHE is out of the house, and she comes back sadly into room and, going to the fire, sits wearily in the large arm-chair. ANNIE enters.*)

ANNIE. Did you call, ma'am?

COL. Call? No.

ANNIE. I thought I heard you, 'm.

COL. (*understanding*). Oh! No, I didn't call you.

ANNIE. Mister Scott got the note, mum.

COL. Did he say anything?

ANNIE. He said he'd be here as soon after half-past seven as ever he could manage.

COL. Thank you, Annie.

(*ANNIE goes out.*)

(*MRS. LA B. returns, closing door cautiously behind her. She starts on seeing COLUMBINE.*)

MRS. LA B. Hullo! You've come out, then. How d'you feel?

COL. I'm not ill, thank you, Barley. Is Tommy . . .

MRS. LA B. He's all right. Sound asleep.

COL. Asleep?

MRS. LA B. Yes. (*Crosses up.*) Come and look at him.

COL. Oh no!

MRS. LA B. Why on earth not?

COL. I might wake him. (*Pauses in thought.*) Oh! (*Starts to her feet.*) But if I don't see him now . . .

MRS. LA B. Eh?

COL. Nothing. You're sure he's asleep?

MRS. LA B. Rather.

COL. (*making a move*). Then I'll—presently. (*Sits weakly.*)

MRS. LA B. You're not going to the show, I suppose?

COL. No. Please don't sit up if you want to go to bed.

MRS. LA B. It won't hurt me to sit up for once. (*Coming down a little*). I'll stay with you for a bit.

COL. (*anxiously*). Oh, please—there's really no need. I laid baby down in Tommy's room, next to May; so I shan't have to disturb you for anything. You know you always like to get to bed early.

MRS. LA B. (*crosses L. of Columbine*). You're sure you'll be all right?

COL. Quite sure. Good-night, Barley.

MRS. LA B. Good-night, my dear.

(*Kisses COLUMBINE.*)

COL. You—you've been so good to me.

MRS. LA B. Eh? Me? Rats!

(*She goes out.*)

(*COLUMBINE rises and goes up to bedroom doors and opens them cautiously. The light within is very dim. She goes towards the unseen TOMMY with a sob, leaving the doors half open. She is out of sight for a second, then BOB shows in SCOTT.*)

BOB. I don't think Miss Columbine will see you, sir. She's not been well all day. Not since you called last, sir.

SCOTT (*wisely*). I know. Poor young lady.

BOB (*obstinately*). I don't think she'll see you, sir.

SCOTT. Oh yes, she will. Go and tell her I am here.

(*BOB exits.*)

(*SCOTT produces an inky note and looks at it pleasantly.*)

(*COLUMBINE very quietly comes back from bedroom and closes door after her. She starts on seeing SCOTT, and is unable for a moment to attract his attention or speak to him.*)

COL. (*speaking at last*). Mister—Scott.

(*SCOTT turns and sees her. His attitude, as he shakes hands, is reproachful but forgiving.*)

SCOTT. I am here.

COL. It's very good of you. You were right—about everything. Tommy—has been run over . . .

SCOTT. I heard. I . . .

COL. (*in very genuine terror*). Oh, I'm frightened! I'm frightened! It's awful! I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do and I'll do it. I must leave them, I know.

SCOTT. I am so thankful.

COL. Yes—I must. I must leave them at once. I will.

SCOTT (*inquiringly*). Where do you intend to go to?

COL. I don't care. Anywhere! I wanted you to tell me.

SCOTT. Oh!

COL. I *must* go. It's for their good, isn't it?

SCOTT. And your own too. Oh yes. Have you any relations?

COL. No.

SCOTT. No, you wouldn't have. Upon my word—to think of your sending for me. It shows how you trust me. (*Thinks.*) You couldn't go into service?

COL. (*not understanding*). Service? (*Sits above table.*)

SCOTT (*hastily*). No, no, you couldn't.

(*Takes her hand and pats it.*)

I'll think of something. You're no hand at writing. (*Looking at note.*)

COL. No.

SCOTT. No, or I could have given you a job on the *Argus*. Then you'd have been where I could look after you. You'd like that? Poor little girl! What you want—(*half to himself*) is some sort of place where you'd have chances. Somewhere where you might meet some honest, respectable man, who'd have the nobleness to marry you in spite of the past.

COL. No, I don't think I want *that*.

SCOTT. Oh, my dear girl, it would be the saving of you. It would give you a fresh footing in society and a good . . . (*Suddenly*) Wha—what would you say . . .

(*Pauses, looking at her closely.*)

COL. What?

SCOTT. If I was to say I'd marry you myself? What would you say?

COL. (*in amazement*). You!

SCOTT. Yes, me! I don't mind! You've sent for me to help you, and I will. I'll make an honest woman of you, and give you a good home, and protect you, and (*with glowing chivalry*) I'll never so much as refer by one harsh word to what you have been.

COL. But I . . .

SCOTT. I don't mind what it means to me. It'd be something worth doing to give you a helping hand, and feel that I'd saved you from a life of sin to be the respectable mistress of a fixed home.

COL. But I couldn't marry you. I don't love you.

SCOTT. I wasn't suggesting marrying for anything like love. (*He is quite proud of his high-mindedness.*) And, after all, love would come in time. Respect and gratitude would be bound to turn to love at last.

COL. I don't think so. And you can't marry anyone you don't love.

SCOTT. Oh yes. Hundreds of wives don't love their husbands, but they're quite happy so long as they respect them. And you do respect me.

COL. Scarry used to tell me that to marry anyone you didn't love was awful. He said marriage and love ought to be the same thing.

SCOTT. Ah, he would. To poison your mind. They're not the same thing a bit.

COL. Not the same thing a bit?

SCOTT. No. Ask anyone. You'd be quite safe with me. You'd be a respectable married woman. All your past would be blotted out.

COL. Would it really make all that difference?

SCOTT. Of course it would. Why else should I try to persuade you?

COL. It's very good of you. (*Hesitates.*) I must leave them. (*Hesitates again.*) You really mean it's not the same thing a bit?

SCOTT. Then you will?

COL. There's no other way.

SCOTT (*sincerely*). You'll never regret it. It's the only thing for you to do. You want to leave here at once, of course.

COL. Oh yes. That's the most important thing of all.

SCOTT. I wonder how long a licence takes. (*Goes to door, opens it and calls*) Robert.

COL. Oh, don't tell Bob.

SCOTT. I just want to look up . . .

(BOB *appears in door.*)

BOB. Yessir?

SCOTT. Have you got a *Whitaker's Almanack* in the house?

BOB. Yessir.

SCOTT. Bring it up, please.

BOB. You don't mean a *Bradshaw*, I suppose, sir?

SCOTT. No. *Whitaker's Almanack*.

(BOB *disappears.*)

(*He closes door and comes back to COLUMBINE. Crosses R. of COLUMBINE.*)

You needn't be afraid that I shall——

COL. (*suddenly*). Oh! Haven't you promised to marry—that girl—Miss Poole—who——

SCOTT (*confused*). Yes. Not definitely. It was understood that we might,

COL. But if you don't marry her, won't that be very awful for her?

SCOTT. She'll be disappointed. But *she's* all right—there'll be plenty . . .

COL. But won't it make her sinful?

SCOTT (*puzzled*). What do you mean?

COL. I don't quite understand about marrying. It's such a muddling thing.

SCOTT (*intensely shocked*). There never was anything but a promise between Miss Poole and me.

(BOB *enters with two books.*)

BOB. I brought *Bradshaw* too, sir, on the chance. There's no trains in *Whitaker*, sir. Nobody never calls for *Whitaker*, sir.

(*Nevertheless SCOTT picks up "Whitaker" and begins to look up his subject.*)

(BOB *looks at COLUMBINE.*)

You're looking very poorly, 'm. I suppose it did give you a turn.

(*They both look at him in surprise. COLUMBINE understands first.*)

COL. Yes, yes.

BOB (*seeing he is not wanted*). Sorry, 'm.

(*Exits.*)

SCOTT (*reading from Whitaker*). "Marriage by banns." (*Skims down paragraph.*) "Marriage by banns—to ensure publicity . . ."

COL. (*interrupting with more decision than she has yet shown*). Scarry wouldn't like that.

SCOTT (*severely*). My dear girl, please don't start talking about what Mister Scaramouche would like. We shan't be married by banns, anyway. By registrar. (*Consulting book.*) Ah, I thought so. A licence takes a whole day to get.

COL. Why?

SCOTT. To prevent too much haste. "Marry in haste and repent at leisure," you know. The day after to-morrow's Sunday: what a nuisance. That makes two days to wait. I shall have to take you to some rooms I know of.

COL. I must leave here to-night. You'll take me away to-night.

SCOTT (*with great circumspection*). Perhaps I'd better not take you there myself. It might not look the thing. (*Crosses L. of COLUMBINE.*) I'll go round and arrange with Missis Jollings and get her to call for you in a cab. (*R. of table.*)

COL. At once?

SCOTT. Very soon.

COL. Suppose Scarry should follow me?

SCOTT. My dear girl, he wouldn't dare.

COL. Wouldn't dare?

SCOTT. He'd know he had no right once we were married. You'd better keep indoors for the next two days. Missis Jollings will look after you. I shan't see you again until I call on Monday with the licence. It wouldn't be the thing. You see how careful I am of you in every respect.

COL. (*thinking of SCARAMOUCHE*). He'll be very unhappy, and he won't understand. Oh, what will he think?

SCOTT. Most likely *he'll* think you were in love with me.

COL. Oh, that would be awful! I couldn't bear to have him think that: it would upset him worse than anything. I . . . (*with resignation*) I shall have to write another letter—to him explaining. Oh, dear. (*Sighs deeply.*)

SCOTT. Yes, leave a note for him. It seems the proper thing to do. You can write it before Missis Jollings gets back here in a cab. Er . . . (*Goes towards door—comes back c.*) Er—don't mention anything about me. He might find out where I lived.

COL. I'll just explain.

SCOTT. That's right. Missis Jollings will be here in half an hour, and I'll call at her place first thing on Monday with the licence and everything correct.

COL. You're very kind. It will put everything right, won't it?

SCOTT. Everything.

(*Takes her hand in farewell.*)

When I look at you I'm glad—really glad—of what I've done. I can see myself in the future, when you're my wife, looked up to and respected by everyone, and no one able to say one word against you—I can see myself looking at you, and feeling proud and happy to think of what I saved you from. Good-night.

(*Goes out, overpowered by his own eloquence.*)

(COLUMBINE *wearily fetches pen, ink, and paper from bureau to table and sits in chair L. She carefully writes two words, looks at them thoughtfully, corrects them, touches them up, and with a careworn "Oh, dear!" starts her letter.*)

(CURTAIN.)

ACT IV

SCENE

MRS. JOLLINGS'S GROUND FLOOR FRONT

A tasteless brightly-papered sitting-room with a door L., a window C. at back, and a fireplace R. There is a very large table dead centre covered with a hideous tablecloth. A large number of plush-seated chairs are around table and against every available foot of wall. A small table with an undecided fern upon it is in the exact centre of the window. A cheap whatnot covered with breakables is in corner above door, and between it and door is COLUMBINE'S dress-basket. There is an uneasy plush chair above fire. The chief characteristic of the room is the size of the table. It is a quarter to nine on Monday morning, and MRS. JOLLINGS is standing at an open window chatting with an unseen neighbour who is probably whitening the next doorstep. MRS. JOLLINGS is a stout, coarse woman of about forty-five; loud-voiced, slovenly, and vulgar. She has a coarse laugh and evidently has a joke up her sleeve. She also winks frequently and vigorously. Her conversation is going on as the curtain rises.

MRS. J. Not once. (*Pauses for reply.*) Eh? (*Pauses again.*) Ha, ha, ha, so I ses to meself. (*Pauses.*) Yes, I should think 'e might. A dam sight worse, I tells 'im. (*Pauses and receives the neighbour's opinion with a roar of laughter.*) Not 'arf! Lors yes. Ever since 'e was born. Dam little prig I calls 'im. (*Pause.*) No, not 'er. I should say she knows wot's wot for all her quiet ways. (*Pauses.*) No, not enough to keep a fly alive. (*Pause.*) Love? Ha, ha, ha. Very like. Ha, ha, ha. (*Pause.*) Wot? (*Pause.*) Oh, there's no knowing, they may stay on 'ere. They took the rooms for a week. (*Pause.*) No, that's nothing to go by. I wouldn't let 'em for less when I 'eard wot the game was. (*Pause.*) Oh yes, most young couples 'as 'oneymoons, but they ain't like most young couples. (*Pauses.*) Ah, you might be shocked if I told you. . . . Ha, ha, ha, hoo, hoo, hoo! (*Stops herself in the middle of a fit of laughter.*) Hulllo, here they come.

(*She hastily closes window and takes a paper bag from table as SCOTT and COLUMBINE pass window from R. to L. MRS. JOLLINGS just has time to get behind door on dress-basket as they enter. She salutes them with the contents of the paper bag—rice—flung with great force full in their faces.*)

Good luck—many happy returns—ha, ha, ha!

COL. (*running to below table—brushing off the rice.*) Whatever did you do that for? (*Goes L. of table.*)

SCOTT (*smiling feebly and extracting a grain from his ear.*) They always do that at weddings. (*Shuts door.*)

COL. Oh? (*Takes hat off.*)

MRS. JOL. Congratulations, my dear. (*Kisses the unwilling bride with great affection.*) Well, he turned up all right after all?

SCOTT. Turned up? What do you mean? Of course I turned . . . (*Very angrily*) What do you mean?

MRS. JOL. Oh, I did him a wrong, bless his heart. Ha, ha, ha!

SCOTT. Of course I called, as I had said I would.

MRS. JOL. Oh, she was sure enough of you. More than I was. I know you gay young sparks. "Do not trust him, gentle maiden." Ha, ha, ha!

(SCOTT goes up L.)

Don't get annoyed, Master Alfie.

SCOTT. I am not annoyed. But I told you I should call on Monday morning . . .

(COLUMBINE sits R. of table.)

MRS. JOL. (*still intensely amused*). Ha, ha, ha! I nearly died of laughing. You should 'ave 'eard 'im, my dear. "Please fetch a young lady from The George in Old Street. I shall call on Monday and marry her!" Oh, ha, ha, ha!

SCOTT (*up L. puzzled*). You had no reason to doubt my word.

MRS. JOL. No. Ha, ha, ha! Still, you might ha' changed your mind.

COL. (*quietly*). Yes, you might have changed your mind, Mister Scott.

MRS. JOL. Mister Scott. Oh . . . (*Goes laughing out of the room.*)

SCOTT. I can't make her out. She never used to laugh like that at our house. I expect she's married unhappily.

COL. (*R. of table*). She says funny things about being married. She makes herself laugh at them, but I don't think they're very funny. She makes it sound rather wrong. It isn't wrong in any way, is it?

SCOTT. Good gracious, no.

COL. She used to be a servant at your house, didn't she?

SCOTT. At mother's, yes.

COL. She told me. She's been up here talking to me an awful lot.

SCOTT. You haven't been out ?

COL. Oh no. I was afraid of meeting anyone . . .

SCOTT. Yes, yes. (*Sits L. of table.*) And she came up and talked to you ? That was very nice of her.

COL. I don't think she minded talking. She's very fond of you.

SCOTT (*surprised*). Is she ?

COL. Oh yes. She told me how respected you were, and how good.

SCOTT. Oh yes.

COL. What a lot she winks, doesn't she ?

SCOTT. Winks ?

COL. After nearly everything she says. I think it's a habit. And she does laugh, too. She laughs every time she looks at one. I thought at first she must be laughing *at* me, but I suppose it's just a habit like the winking. I don't like the way she talks, though. She makes everything sound nasty. I suppose she's a very good woman.

SCOTT (*severely*). She left our house for bad behaviour. But I couldn't think where else to bring you to. You see, even the worst of people may be instruments for good.

COL. Yes. (*Spoken merely for the sake of politeness.*)

SCOTT. Well, how do you feel ? You've got me ! (*Rises, crosses round above table, produces marriage certificate.*) There's no going back on that, even if I wanted to. As long as you don't do anything really bad nothing can separate us. No matter how sick I might get of you or anything, I've got to stick by you now. (*Lays certificate on table, going L.*) Upon my word, women go talking about their rights. It seems to me the law's all on their side. (*Gives her certificate.*)

COL. (*looking it at without interest*). Oh, I've got one of these.

SCOTT (*turns*). WHAT !!!

COL. (*continuing quite quietly*). Not quite like this. I used to have to show it to magistrates before they would let me do my turn at the hall.

SCOTT. Oh, good gracious, that was a birth certificate ! (*Mops his brow.*) You did give me a turn. This is a marriage certificate.

COL. Oh !

SCOTT. You've not got one of these ?

COL. No. Why, you seem glad ! I don't understand. I thought you said I ought to have one.

SCOTT. One—yes. Not two.

COL. It's very muddling.

SCOTT. This makes you *Missis Scott*. (*Facetiously takes her hand.*) How do you do, Missis Scott ? That is—I can call you Columbine. Are you glad now you're married to me ?

COL. Oh yes. It's far better than being a curse to everyone and being—sinful, and—and—hell.

SCOTT. Oh ! (*Goes to fire.*)

COL. This is not a very pretty room, is it ?

SCOTT. Oh well, we shan't stop here. What I propose doing is to go to some seaside town for a month—you and me—see? Then I can bring you back and introduce you to my friends, and say I met you and married you while we—while *I* was on a holiday.

COL. It sounds very silly, doesn't it?

SCOTT. Silly?

COL. Couldn't I go to the seaside alone, and you just come and fetch me at the end of the month, and . . .

SCOTT. My dear girl!

COL. I'd much rather.

SCOTT. You don't know what you're talking about. Of course I couldn't. The idea's ridiculous.

COL. I'm sorry.

SCOTT. We mustn't let people know about *this* (*indicating room*).

COL. It is wrong, then?

SCOTT (*annoyed*). No, no, of course it isn't wrong. What makes you keep saying that?

COL. I don't know. But if it isn't wrong why do you mind people knowing?

SCOTT. Because they wouldn't understand.

COL. Then what would it matter?

SCOTT. You really are . . . It *would* matter. (*Gives her no chance to reply. She has given up trying to understand the situation and is arranging the ribbon in her hat.*) I shall have to give Missis Jollings something to keep her mouth shut. Thank goodness she's not in our set.

COL. I'll take my hat upstairs. (*Crosses below table.*)

SCOTT. That's a nice tidy little lady.

COL. Oh, I never leave hats or boots in the sitting-room. Scarry was very particular. (*Opens door.*)

SCOTT (*turning angrily*). Will you please remember . . . (*She gently closes door behind her. He grunts indignantly and goes to glass over fireplace, in which he regards himself thoughtfully.*)

(MRS. JOLLINGS *enters with tray on which are three glasses of wine and some biscuits.*)

MRS. JOL. (*knowingly*). You're not a tee-totaller now, I know, Mister Alfie.

SCOTT. Yes, I am.

MRS. JOL. Oh, get out with yer! You used to be a lot of things. You don't go to Sunday school now—eh?

SCOTT. I am a *teacher*.

MRS. JOL. (*going into a convulsion of laughter*). Oho, ho! What do you teach? Is it a young ladies' class, Master Alfie? What do you teach 'em? Ha, ha, ha! Oh, *I* know. You well-brought-up young fellers always kicks over the traces when you get away from home.

SCOTT. Really, Missis Jollings, I don't understand . . .

MRS. JOL. (*still laughing*). And *I* was given notice for waving me 'and to a bobby. And *you* was the one as told on me. *You!* Ha, ha, ha! Bless your 'eart, I don't bear no malice. (*Comes to him.*) 'Ave your fling I say.

SCOTT. I do not understand you. I am sorry I came to your rooms. Surely anyone can get married?

MRS. JOL. Ha, ha, ha. Oh yes. Anyone can *get married*. But it isn't everyone as takes a baby with them for the 'oneymoon!

SCOTT (*thoroughly startled*). A baby? Did you say a baby?

MRS. JOL. (*nodding and choking with laughter*). Not 'arf. Didn't you expect me to notice a little thing like that? So like you too . . .

SCOTT. But this is awful! Do you mean to say she's brought a baby here?

MRS. JOL. You didn't expect 'er to leave it on the work'ouse steps, did you? When you was good enough to marry 'er too. She's told me 'ow kind it was of you. Oh, ha, ha, ha!

SCOTT. Stop laughing. Stop it, I tell you. Stop it! (*To table.*) Can't you see? . . . Did she bring only the one?

MRS. JOL. Only the one? Good Lord, are there any more?

(COLUMBINE *returns, still very quiet and reserved. Crosses to R.*)

Oh, my dear! He ain't 'arf a one, this young feller of yours. As serious as an old owl, too. Not a laugh in 'im.

SCOTT. Please go outside. (*R. of table.*)

MRS. JOL. (*pausing at the table*). I thought we might drink a 'ealth, my dear; but 'e won't 'ave any.

SCOTT (*angrily*). Neither will . . .

COL. No, I would rather not, thanks.

MRS. JOL. (*to SCOTT*). She can answer for herself, y' see. (*Takes up glass.*) Your health, my dear; coupled with Master Alfie, and—and—the blessed baby. (*Drinks and goes laughing out of room.*)

SCOTT (*closing door after her and turning angrily on COLUMBINE*). She says you've brought one of those children of yours. (*Stays at door.*)

COL. Only baby.

SCOTT. Only!

COL. What's the matter?

SCOTT. Well, I didn't bargain for that.

COL. But I couldn't leave baby behind. (*R. of table.*)

SCOTT. Of course you could. You left the others.

COL. (*putting up her hand*). Don't! (*Regains her self-control and goes on very quietly*) They—they can do—without me now. A baby cannot live without its mother.

SCOTT. What nonsense.

(*Goes up L.*)

COL. I am sorry if you don't like baby. She is very good. I know *some* landladies don't like children in the house.

SCOTT. I'm very fond of children. But think of how it looks. Can't you see what people will say? (*Up L.*)

COL. (*wonderingly*). No. (*Sits R. of table.*) What?

(There is an explosion of mirth just outside the door, curiously close to the keyhole. SCOTT goes quickly to the door and flings it wide open, the laughs retreating meanwhile into the distance.)

SCOTT. She was listening. There's a sample of what people will say.

COL. They'll laugh? (*Goes R. of table.*)

SCOTT (*with sarcasm*). Oh yes, they'll laugh right enough. (*Paces up and down.*) I can see what it is. I shall have to sell the business and start again in some fresh town where I'm not known, that's all. (*Up room.*)

COL. I am sorry. (*Sits.*)

SCOTT (*less angrily as he looks at her worried face.*) It can't be helped. Perhaps it'll be best in the long run. I shall do all right wherever I go. I've got capital. (*Sits L. of table.*) (*More amiably*) It's no use quarrelling to-day, is it?

COL. (*gratefully*). You are good.

SCOTT. Am I? Well, I don't want to appear unpleasant to you, do I? Anyway not to-day.

COL. I think you're awfully kind.

SCOTT. Suppose you give me a little reward for my kindness.

COL. What?

SCOTT. Well. We've been married half an hour, and you've not kissed me yet.

COL. Oh, I'm not fond of being kissed by people.

SCOTT. Why, my dear girl, I saw that man—Salamandro . . .

COL. George? Oh yes. But he's different.

SCOTT. Different? Hang it all. (*Rises.*) You seem to forget I'm your husband. (*Comes R. of table above her.*)

COL. It seems a funny idea to let a man kiss you just because he's your husband.

SCOTT. Just one. Really I think I deserve . . .

(She resignedly offers her cheek, but he puts one arm awkwardly round her and kisses her on the lips. She starts up furiously angry and startled in an instant. Turns up stage at fire.)

COL. Oh, you mustn't kiss me like that! Nobody ever . . .

SCOTT (*thunderstruck at her outburst*). My dear girl! (*Above table.*)

COL. How dare you? If you did that when Scarry was about he'd knock you down!

SCOTT (*comes down*). Good Heavens ! Hasn't your own husband a right to kiss you now ?

COL. Certainly not ! (*More collectedly*) In a nice fatherly way—like George—yes. But nobody but Scarry . . .

SCOTT. Look here, don't go on in this silly way. Try to remember you're married to me.

COL. (*reminding him of the—to her—important fact*). But you don't love me.

SCOTT (*more agreeably*). I never said I did. (*With conviction*) No, of course I don't. But I've done a good deal for you, and—dash it all, you know, you are my wife. I've practically ruined myself here, and I shall have to start the world over again. I'm not grumbling—I don't grumble—but really you've no right to treat me like this. A man has the right to kiss his own wife, you know.

COL. Even if he doesn't love her ?

SCOTT (*rather educationally than angrily*). Of course he has. You don't seem to realise the sacredness of marriage. Now don't be a silly girl any more.

(*In an argumentative sort of way he tries to kiss her again. She pushes him angrily away just as the door opens and SCARAMOUCHE walks in. She holds out both arms to him.*)

COL. Oh, Scarry !

(*SCARAMOUCHE comes straight over to her. As he does so COLUMBINE gives SCOTT an "I-told-you-so" glance and says*)

And you said he wouldn't dare !

SCARA. (*taking her anxiously by both arms*). Baby ? Where's baby ?
COL. Upstairs.

SCARA. Thank God. I thought you'd drowned her—and yourself. I've found you. It was only by chance. You have given us a turn. (*He suddenly hugs her very tight. She clings to him.*)

SCOTT (*above table c. in a tone of remonstrance*). Would you mind leaving my wife alone ?

SCARA. Your wife ?

SCOTT. Yes, my wife. You can . . .

SCARA. (*not in the least jealous, but rather in the tone of one resenting an insult*). How dare you ?

SCOTT. Hang it all, it's true. (*Pushing forward certificate on table.*)

SCARA. (*seeing certificate lying on table and picking it up*). What's this ? (*Reads it.*) You scoundrel !

(*SCOTT is too amazed to speak.*)

Why can't you go about your love-making like an honest man ?

SCOTT (*not at all sure of anything*). Love-making? I—I married her to make an honest woman of her. I've saved her from . . .

SCARA. You frightened her out of her wits with your preaching.

SCOTT. She was—I—well, she's my wife. Let her decide between . . .

SCARA. I'll let her do nothing of the sort.

(COLUMBINE is sitting weakly back in arm-chair.)

Columbine, you're coming home.

(COLUMBINE gives an involuntary cry of pleasure. The door opens and GEORGE enters, followed by JESSIE POOLE. The latter is a dark, business-like young woman, probably older than SCOTT and certainly stronger.)

JESSIE (*stopping at door*). You've found her, then?

SCARA. Yes. Come in, Miss Poole. It's all right. We're very, very grateful to you.

GEORGE (*coming awkwardly to COLUMBINE and shaking her hand*). Quite well? Good egg!

SCARA. Baby's safe, George.

GEORGE (*deeply moved*). Good egg, good egg, good egg. (*Shakes hands with SCARAMOUCHE and blows nose violently.*)

JESSIE (*who has meanwhile been regarding SCOTT with anger not un-mixed with admiration*). You're a nice one for a young man, aren't you?

SCOTT. You—brought them?

(COLUMBINE and SCARAMOUCHE move R. of table. COLUMBINE sits in chair, SCOTT above table.)

JESSIE. Yes, I did. And it's lucky for you someone takes the trouble to stop you making a fool of yourself. Some girls would never have given you another thought after hearing. Running off with people's wives! I wonder you're not ashamed. Besides, breaking my heart with your goings on.

SCOTT. It's done . . .

JESSIE. And I thought you . . . It just shows you never know who you can trust. I shall have to keep a nice eye on you for the future, I can see. I . . .

SCOTT. The future?

JESSIE. Ah, it's a marvel I don't throw you over. Most girls would have. Fancy being the wife of a Don Juan.

SCOTT (*greatly hurt*). You don't seem to understand, Jessie. We are properly married.

JESSIE. Married! (*Looks all around in horror.*)

SCARA. (*catching her eye and nodding*). It's quite true, Miss Poole. (*Shows her licence in his hand.*)

JESSIE (*crosses to table C., with certificate*). Bigamy! (*Turns on SCOTT.*)

SCOTT. Certainly not! She never was his legal wife.

JESSIE. And you've been fool enough to marry her!

SCOTT. Jessie! (*Puts hand on her arm.*)

JESSIE. Don't. I shall never trust another man. You're all bad. The first pretty face that comes along.

SCOTT. I should have thought you would have understood my motives. I can quite understand you're being upset.

JESSIE. Thank you. I don't want your sympathy or your apologies. I hope you will be as happy as you deserve to be, but it will cost you something, I can tell you. You can't treat people like this for nothing.

(*Exit.*)

SCARA. (*after a moment in which SCOTT looks from one to the other of them for comfort and finds none*). Miss Poole doesn't seem to share your views on marriage, Mister Scott. (*Moving*) Come, Columbine, we'll be getting home.

SCOTT (*getting nasty for the first time*). Here, you're not going off with my wife, anyway.

SCARA. (*walking up to him angrily*). By God, don't you say that again!

SCOTT. Hang it all, I've got a legal right . . .

(*Backing away from the very irate SCARAMOUCHE, his calves come in contact with the dress-basket, on which he involuntarily sits, falling back against the wall. SCARAMOUCHE stands over him.*)

SCARA. Get up and get out. Take yourself outside.

SCOTT. But these are *my* rooms. I paid for them. (*Appealing to COLUMBINE*) Do you think I'm being treated fair?

COL. (*evenly and decisively*). You said he wouldn't dare to follow me, and he has. And I *couldn't* allow you to kiss me, and you say husbands have a right to. And people don't seem to agree about marriage, so I think I'd better go back with Scarry. I—I want to. (*Advances a little to table.*)

SCOTT (*rising*). Well! This is the last time . . . (*Goes out and shuts door behind him.*)

SCARA. (*tearing up licence*). Confound his impudence! Why didn't you tell me, Columbine, I'd have . . . (*Looks at pieces.*) Well, it's too late now. (*c. of table below.*)

COL. You're very angry with me? (*To R. corner of table below.*)

SCARA. No, no, no. Nobody could be angry with you after reading your poor little letter. You heard it, George?

GEORGE. No.

SCARA. (*producing a letter inkily like SCOTT'S of the previous act: to COLUMBINE*). May I?

(COLUMBINE nods. *He reads the note, emphasising the stops.*)

"We are awful sinners, but I am the one.
I must go away and never see you again because I am so.
I love you and I don't love anyone else.
Except the Babies, and that's different.
It—Is—All—Awful."

(Bends down and kisses her.) Poor little lady! Come along.
You'll come home to breakfast with us, George?

GEORGE *(at first)*. Er—I . . .

SCARA. That's right. Then, while Columbine fetches baby, you
and I will go and look for a cab.

(GEORGE crosses to door. SCARAMOUCHE is following.)

COL. Oh, don't both go!

SCARA. We shall only be a moment.

COL. Yes, but—I don't want to be left alone. When I'm all alone
I think and think. And it makes me so miserable.

(The two men exchange significant glances.)

SCARA. Go for the cab, George, will you? The little lady mustn't
be left alone any more.

GEORGE *(with great depression)*. Bad egg!

(Exits.)

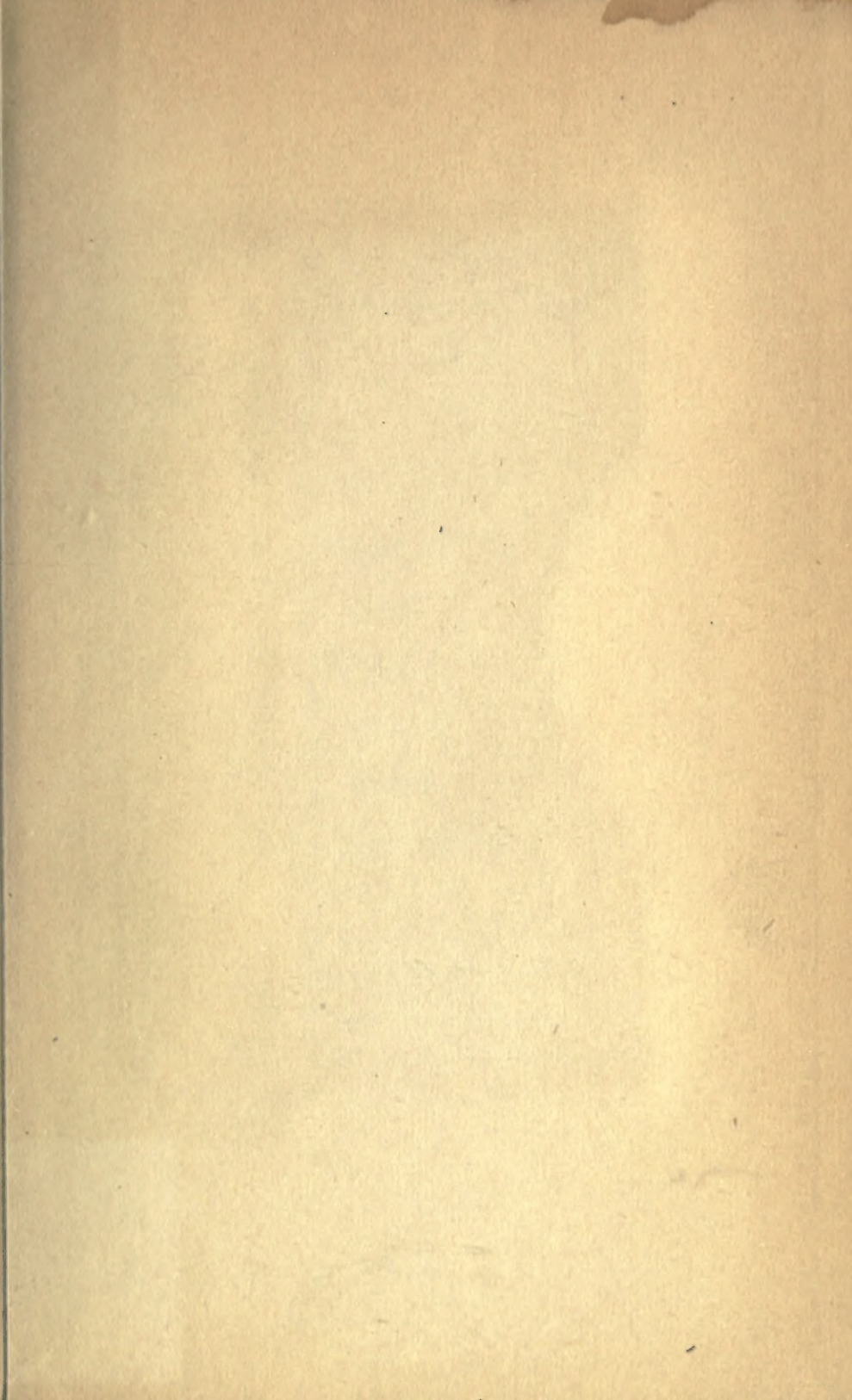
(CURTAIN.)

THE END

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